Speaking with Silent Sculptures
Investigating the sculptural works of Cyprian Mpho Shilakoe

Elizabeth Rankin

In 1988, while tracking down sculptures for the exhibition *Images of Wood*, I visited the University of Fort Hare to see the art collected by Professor Eddie de Jager, who had been farsighted enough to acquire works by contemporary black artists when few had realised their significance. I well remember the exhilaration of looking with him at amazing works tucked away in offices, storerooms and cupboards (the University had not yet built its grand De Beers Centenary Gallery). Perhaps most memorable of all were carvings by Cyprian Mpho Shilakoe, previously known to me only as a printmaker. I had seen nothing quite like these works in my research on South African sculpture and they seemed exceptional in their powerfully compact form – from the diminutive poignancy of the *Dying Child* to the monumental ambition of the *Totem* forms with their intriguingly mysterious subject matter. I was immediately convinced that my exhibition would be incomplete without Shilakoe, and persuaded the Johannesburg Art Gallery to transport two works all the way from Alice in the Cape, including a *Totem*, over two metres tall, which was an imposing presence at *Images of Wood* in 1989.[1]

Yet, although these works seemed important, few enough deductions could be made about them with so few examples to study. In the years that have intervened, more Shilakoe sculptures have become available, chiefly from private owners in response to the increasing interest in acquiring his work, and a number of public collections now possess carvings by him. While investigating works for this retrospective exhibition, Jill Addleson was able to track down some twenty sculptures in collections[2] (quite a few of which have changed hands recently[3]), to which more may be added from references in publications,[4] and she and Philippa Hobbs discovered a further five three-dimensional works belonging to Shilakoe's family.[5] In the context of Shilakoe's very short career as an artist – not even five years from his enrolment as a student until his untimely death in 1972 – this relatively high number demonstrates that the sculptures were not mere exceptions to his printmaking, but a significant part of his oeuvre, deserving of our attention. But in many ways they remain as enigmatic as when I first saw them.

Investigating the formative years

While there is a fair amount published on Shilakoe's prints, there is so little documentation and writing about his sculptural works that we know almost nothing about them, making their interpretation problematic. The tragedy of Shilakoe's early death means that the artist himself as an avenue of enquiry has long been closed to the researcher. Sadly this is also true for his classmates at Fine Art School of the Evangelical Art and Craft Centre at Rorke's Drift in KwaZulu-Natal, where he studied from 1968-69. Of the first class of six students, John Muafangejo, Albert Ndlovu, Dan Rakgoathe and Caiphas Nxumalo, like Shilakoe himself, are dead, and Philippa Hobbs and I were never able to trace the last of the group, Paulos Mchunu, during our research on the Centre.

The only people left to consult from that period are his teachers, today living in their homeland Sweden.[6] Ola Granath, who was involved in planning the Fine Art courses at Rorke's Drift from late 1966, and Otto Lundbohm, who arrived in mid-1968 soon after they had started, confirm that their students had classes in all forms of art – sculpture as well as drawing, painting and printmaking – although few enough seem to have continued with three-dimensional work after their studies. Both teachers recall Shilakoe making sculptures as well as the prints for which he became so well known. Granath, whose memory of Shilakoe's sculptures before his own departure from Rorke's Drift in mid-1969 establishes an early date for them, remembers that he preferred carving to modelling, and that he used yellow wood at the time. Lundbohm talks of students using such woods as jacaranda, wattle, mntomboti and eucalyptus, and recalls that the latter two were the most popular. The majority of the carvings by Shilakoe that are known today are made from Rhodesian teak, which suggests that they are of later date.[7]

The availability of wood, and the type to be had, would have been an important factor in Shilakoe's development as a carver. The closed form of most of his later sculptures seems a response to the quadrilateral shape of cut timber, as opposed to the cylindrical and less regular form of unprocessed wood.[8] His use of hardwoods would also have influenced their cutting and surface. A number of those who knew Shilakoe have mentioned that an important source of wood for him was railway sleepers, which were made of hardwoods like Rhodesian teak, the material used for almost all the known sculptures. The availability of sleepers might also have prompted the scale of Shilakoe's large *Totems*, which are over two metres high, and their narrow format. Eric Mbatha, himself a 1972 Rorke's Drift graduate, who recalls that he met Shilakoe there in 1970,[9] talks of a supplier of railway sleepers in Glencoe, while Shilakoe's dealer in Johannesburg, Linda Givon, thought that he was able to obtain them somewhere on the Reef.[10]

Otto Lundbohm remembers that Shilakoe had first found this source of wood on a visit to the Centre when he was a 'guest student' after he had qualified,[11] and recalls fetching some with him from Pietermaritzburg, where they were available at only R5 apiece. Access to a vehicle would have been essential to transport these large pieces of wood.[12] Lundbohm was clearly a teacher whose interest in students extended beyond the time they were enrolled: he was also the one who assisted Shilakoe to acquire an etching press imported from Sweden. Mbatha recalls that the Centre was a source of carving tools too. Continuing contact with Rorke's Drift seems to have been important, but Shilakoe also set up his own studio with his new etching press and his own sculpture tools at St Ansgar's in Roodepoort.

Recently new evidence about Shilakoe's career as a sculptor has come to light. His sister, Emily Mahlangu, recalls him making sculpture before he went to Rorke's Drift, which suggests that the Centre was not the starting point for his sculptural work, though it probably provided the stimulus to develop it. An earlier beginning to his sculpture is also supported by five works still owned by his family – two modelled in clay and three carved in wood – which are quite different in style from the later pieces, although it is not certain that all were made before he was a student at Rorke's Drift. That Shilakoe had already established an interest in three-dimensional art before he went to the Centre might explain why he continued with carving when relatively

few Rorke's Drift students did so and when he was pursuing a successful career as a printmaker.[13]

Five years younger than Cyprian, Emily was one of four brothers and sisters from their large family who were raised by their paternal grandmother, Emily Shilakoe (neé Dibakoane), in Mathibestad near Hammanskraal,[14] and she has memories of the young Shilakoe modelling small items like oxen in clay. These first ventures into three-dimensional form were typical of many small boys, but once at Paledi Secondary School, when he was living with his parents in Dennilton after his grandmother's death, Shilakoe began drawing, suggesting that he had a growing interest in art, although she remembers no classes in that subject at his school.[15]

Significantly for this essay, Emily recalls that the two clay works owned by the family were amongst his first sculptural ventures at this time. These quite complex forms, a group and a single figure, have moved a long way from the simple 'klei osse' of childhood games. The work with multiple interactive figures that are grouped on a shallow base demonstrates a naturalism not evident in Shilakoe's later sculpture, with facial features, ears and hair clearly defined, for example. The treatment of the bodies has a plastic vitality, an aspect even more apparent in the single figure. Its long limbs are drawn up against the body in tortuous instability, and the marks of the worked clay add to its expressive quality.[16]

Emily also remembers Shilakoe making his first carvings at this time. She recounts how her brother, equipped with an axe, had the task of fetching firewood from the bush near Dennilton, when she sometimes accompanied him, and that this supplied him with both wood and tools for his early carving. Thus his earliest material was not commercially cut timber and the forms are closer to growing wood. This is particularly evident in the largest of the family's sculptures, which is carved within the shape of a tree trunk.[17] A series of figures is captured within the configuration of the wood, in some cases merging with it, offering a sequence of images that utilises the trunk's three-dimensional potential to the full and unfolds as the viewer walks around the work. In contrast to the schematic quality of most of the figures, there are also naturalistic details such as a curving arm and protruding foot, so delicately defined that one wonders whether they were of later date. Emily recalls that Shilakoe had no chisels for his early carving, but used his axe to shape his works, supplemented with other tools such as a screwdriver for details.

The second of the family's carvings, which she believes to be his earliest piece, is none the less quite elaborate in form, with a distortion paralleling the expressive qualities of the single clay figure. But *Figure with Turned Head* (a name devised for the catalogue in the absence of a known title) is far more complex than the modelled image. The larger figure with its tipped head and stunted legs, closely clinging arms and enlarged hands, is seemingly compressed into the closed yet organic composition. Reading this complicated work is difficult, compounded by the fact that it was later varnished, and interpretation is also challenged by puzzling forms such as the gouges in the head that seem to take the place of ears and the curving forms running down the back of the figure. Particularly enigmatic – and expressive – is the shrieking, crouching male creature which emerges between the figure's legs.

Far more straightforward is the third of the three carvings in the family's collection which represents a young woman carrying a child, whose simpler form persuades one to deduce that it might have been the earliest carving.[18] *BaPedi Girl* (as it is named in the catalogue) is the work that Emily discussed with me, calling it a mother and child, although the very short skirt and uncovered torso – as well as her slender proportions – suggests that the figure is a girl, perhaps carrying a sibling. With the thinness of her torso and legs emphasised by her large head, respectfully lowered, she seems a rather frail and vulnerable figure. She looks down tenderly, perhaps sadly, at the small baby cradled in her (now broken) arms. When I asked Shilakoe's sister about the work, she said it was not happy, a 'silent sculpture' – a memorable phrase that inspired the title of this essay.

Speculating about sources

Now that we know that Shilakoe made sculptures before his training at Rorke's Drift, it is interesting to consider where the idea to make three-dimensional works might have come from, as Emily Mahlangu has no recollection of any family members or close friends who were carvers, whom the boy might have seen at work, nor of any carved figures in their home. Of the few wooden artefacts that were in use, such as implements for grinding mealies and the sole wooden dish which belonged to her father, she knows nothing of their makers. With no immediate sources in the home environment, and no art classes at school that Emily is aware of, what sort of carvings might the young Shilakoe have seen to prompt his own work? There seem to be a number of possibilities that need to be tested – Christian imagery which was important for many early black artists; carving from the Pedi community of which he was a part; other African sculptural traditions; and contemporary South African art.

Although the story of Shilakoe growing up on a distant mission station and attending mission school has been refuted by Emily Mahlangu, Christian sources might still be suggested by his upbringing, particularly the early years with his grandmother. This inveterate Anglican churchgoer[19] played a key role in Shilakoe's life, and is said to have been close to the boy, looking after him from the time he was two until she died in 1962 when he was sixteen. His sister recalls that he was deeply upset by her death, as though she had been his mother, and spent a great deal of time on his own on the mountain near his parents' home at the time, perhaps also making his first carving. Shilakoe's sensitive representation of Koko as he called her is one of his most memorable etchings, *Inspiration from Koko* (1971), and depicts a far more individualised image than is usual in his work, which might be construed as a posthumous portrait. It has been suggested that the more schematic faces surrounding her are ancestral beings, but it is noteworthy that Koko wears a cross and carries a candle, both associated with Christian worship: in this context, the encircling heads might be read as clusters of stylised cherubims.

That Shilakoe had some personal interest in Christianity as a youngster seems implied by his nickname at home and school, 'Bishop'. His sister recounts that the children accompanied their grandmother to church every Sunday, and that she had young Shilakoe read to her from the Bible, as she could not read herself. Their parents were also religious, and churchgoing continued when the children returned to live with them in Dennilton. So it would not seem improbable that Shilakoe's early carving might have related to these religious beliefs, perhaps to some imagery he had seen in

church: Anglican churches in South Africa accommodated artworks, not least by black artists who had trained at Anglican missions.[20] But despite his Christian upbringing and his later studies at the Evangelical Lutheran Church Art and Craft Centre at Rorke's Drift, there is no discernable evidence of Christian themes or related forms in any of Shilakoe's sculptures, either early or later. And accounts of the artist by those who remember him give us reason to believe that Shilakoe had set aside Christian in favour of African beliefs.[21] The visionary figures surrounding Koko in his etching of 1971 are indeed likely to refer to ancestors, quite different from western angelic forms.

Perhaps, then, other ritual images might have played a part. While Eric Mbatha knew Shilakoe only as an adult, he recollects that he spoke 'about carvings, curios of his home town', and states that he 'liked to do sculptures because he grew up doing them from his home town', which suggests some awareness of sculptural work in his own community. Amongst the Pedi people there is a tradition of figurative carving associated with male initiation. These representations of the human figure are fairly naturalistic, with the stocky proportions typical of many African carvings, and shaped within the cylindrical form of natural wood.[22] While most of Shilakoe's carvings are considerably more stylised, there are elements in some works that suggest a link with Pedi forms, notably the relative naturalism and the traditional dress of the early *BaPedi Girl.* The cap of hair on one of the figures in *Long Journey* is reminiscent of the formalised helmet-like treatment I have seen on a number of initiation figures,[23] and Julia Charlton points out that the concave contours of the headpiece resembles those sometimes found on Pedi dolls.[24] In more general terms, a number of Shilakoe's carvings are single figures, and almost all are closed compositions working within the shape of his material, characteristics which also suggest a possible relationship to Pedi carving.

But any hope of confirming initiation figures as a clear source of inspiration was dashed when, in response to my query, Emily Mahlangu told me that Shilakoe had never taken part in initiation.[25] And, as it is recorded that initiation carvings were burned after the rituals were completed,[26] the idea of an indigenous influence seemed doomed. However, the fact that some of these figures have found their way into collections demonstrates that not all of them were destroyed, so there is the possibility that the boy might have seen some examples. I am not postulating a direct influence – for which there is no evidence – but perhaps some knowledge that might have stirred an early interest in carving for a young man who later told Linda Givon:

> I am working to record our philosophy and legends. You white people are very lucky because you have the Bible which is a mass of legends. Nobody has done this for us, so I must do it.[27]

That Shilakoe favoured an African emphasis in his work, and might have selected an art form associated with African culture, is also suggested in his critique of the missionaries, and by implication teachers, at Rorke's Drift:

> Sure I appreciated all they've done, but too often their Light overshadowed our Light. They cut us off – did not teach us of the Kingdom of Benin, of glorious masks, of our beautiful ancestors.[28]

These interests might have prompted Shilakoe to seek out other African sources for his imagery if local ones were not readily available to him – perhaps better-known historical examples from central or west Africa, for example – although there was little enough available to see in South Africa at the time, even in books. It seems unlikely that he would have had access to any such material in Dennilton. But, despite Shilakoe's complaint that Rorke's Drift did not teach African art, some material was available at the Centre, which even subscribed to *African Arts* during Otto Lundbohm's time. As Shilakoe submitted works to the *African Arts* competition of 1972, we can feel confident that he was aware of this American publication.

The illustrations in the journal, which began appearing in mid-1968, would have underlined the importance of carving in Africa, and shown Shilakoe many examples of stylised representations in compact cylindrical sculptures. None of the illustrations in the early volumes available to me seem to suggest a direct influence, but some point the way to the pronounced stylisation that Shilakoe deploys, such as the radical distortions of Makonde figures,[29] and the closely grouped knob-like forms that characterise some of his carvings are not dissimilar to the richly textured surfaces of Cameroon pipes.[30] It is not possible to know which volumes of the journal might have been available to him, but it seems highly probable that he would at least have seen the one for Autumn 1971 for which his close friend Dan Rakgoathe had written on his own work.[31] That number coincidentally included an article on the architecture of Cameroon, illustrating doorposts richly carved with superimposed stylised figures,[32] which might bear some relationship to the form of Shilakoe's *Totems* – two of which would themselves be illustrated in the first number of *African Arts* for 1973 when it was announced, posthumously, that he was the competition prizewinner for the previous year.[33] The distinctiveness of Shilakoe's later sculptures, including these, suggests that he may have been inspired to explore innovative styles by art forms about which he had not previously been aware.

Another possible source would have been sculptors associated with the contemporary efflorescence amongst black South African artists who were gaining some recognition in the 1960s. There was almost nothing published on these artists at the time, and it seems unlikely that a schoolboy would have had the means to travel to Johannesburg and visit its galleries, where artists like Sydney Kumalo, Ben Macala, Lucas Sithole and Ezrom Legae, all associated with the Polly Street Art Centre, were beginning to exhibit sculpture. However, his sister's recollection that Shilakoe met Dan Rakgoathe – who was at one stage one of Emily's school teachers – while he still lived in Dennilton suggests another possible early source of information. Although Rakgoathe was to go to Rorke's Drift in 1967, just ahead of Shilakoe, to undertake studio work in pursuit of a fine arts degree from the University of South Africa, he had already completed an art teacher's qualification at Ndaleni in Natal, a mission training college known for the very strong interest in wood carving amongst its art students.

While I have not come across any three-dimensional works by Rakgoathe himself, he would have been familiar with carvers there, and might, for example, have mentioned the work of Solomon Sedibane to Shilakoe, as he was also Pedi. Sedibane had studied at Ndaleni in the late 1950s just before Rakgoathe went there in 1960, and was best known at the time for his naturalistic studies of Pedi women. There are a number of figures by him that show bare-breasted women in traditional garb, some with children, which are not unlike Shilakoe's early *BaPedi Girl*, such as one in the Campbell

Collections of the University of Natal, dated 1960, and others in the Fort Hare collection.[34] The similarity lies not only in the dress, which Shilakoe might occasionally have had the opportunity to observe for himself amongst rural Pedi, but in the naturalistic style. And they share the same simple composition of an upright, symmetrical figure, with the weight evenly distributed between the supporting legs, on a small round base that is carved as part of the sculpture.[35] This is a sole example of work by Shilakoe that can be aligned with the representation of African 'types', popular with white collectors and the tourist trade. The other early works that we know by him in the family collection rely on dynamic organic line and the distortion of proportions, related to a more expressive sculptural language. This was explored by other Ndaleni carvers, such as Eric Ngcobo, who had studied at Ndaleni in 1953, and deployed strong stylisation in his figures, although his stylisation was generally more angular.

Soon after the mid-century, a number of black artists were beginning to make their mark with distinctive styles that seem aimed at emotive form rather than naturalism, using distortions as Shilakoe did in *Figure with Turned Head*. In particular, the conspicuously large hands are not uncommon. Expressive distortion, including the enlarged hand motif, is possibly best known in pictorial forms, such as drawings by Dumile Feni and Julian Motau, artists who were known to Rakgoathe, as indeed were some white artists working in an expressive mode, such as Wopko Jensma.[36] But it was also used by sculptors, such as the Cape artist Louis Maurice, in a carved figure he made before he left South Africa in 1952,[37] and Duke Ketye who had studied at Mariannhill Mission in the early 1960s.[38] Although I have said that it seems unlikely that Shilakoe knew the work of Polly Street artists when he first made sculpture, he could have learnt about them after 1970 from Eric Mbatha who had attended Polly Street for a time: Mbatha recalls telling him about painter Louis Maqhubela and sculptors Sydney Kumalo, Ezrom Legae and Lucas Sithole, and they too shared an interest in expressive distortion. Kumalo and Legae worked in clay and bronze, but Sithole was also a carver. Shilakoe's earlier pieces seem to favour fairly smooth surfaces like those used in many of Sithole's carvings, as well as most Ndaleni works. But his later sculpture exploits chisel marks to create a lively texturing, similar to that used by the KwaZulu-Natal sculptor Michael Zondi, who was known to Dan Rakgoathe, and who had relatively wide exposure in the 1960s with a solo exhibition at Durban Art Gallery and inclusion in the South African exhibits at the Venice Biennale.

A study of Shilakoe's prints suggests that he was aware of the 'township art' of Polly Street, so we should not discount the possibility that he knew of works by contemporary black sculptors too. And, even if the likelihood that Shilakoe saw many of these works at first hand seems slim, he may have been motivated to share in their search for a sculptural language by hearing of the achievements of such sculptors, not only from Rakgoathe and Mbatha, but also through the increased range of art contacts he would have had once he went to Rorke's Drift. Even though the Swedish teachers did not encourage interaction with South African art institutions, there were links with the African Art Centre in Durban and participation in the Art South Africa Today exhibitions at the Durban Art Gallery. It is unlikely that students would have been unaware of the growing emergence of black artists who were forging distinctive styles, as they were aiming to do themselves. It seems telling that only in one instance that we know of did Shilakoe carve a more conventional African 'type', *BaPedi Girl*.

Although he was interested in telling African stories, this was not to be through descriptive representations of African figures in a naturalistic western mode. His concern seems to have been to find an expressive style that would, as he put it, 'record our philosophy and legends'.

The idea that Shilakoe's art was intended to convey an African world view is a compelling one. Moreover, his prediction of his own death suggests psychic powers and a link with the occult that has caught the attention of many who have written about his work.[39] When Dan Rakgoathe wrote a tribute to the artist in the American journal *African Arts* soon after his death, he described Shilakoe's vision as 'mystically perceptive', and said that he had a 'spiritualistic gift of extra-sensory perception', which had given him foreknowledge of his posthumous prize in the competition organised by *African Arts*.[40] The accompanying tribute from the Reverend Hal Eads also mentions that Shilakoe 'was into such things as ancestors and spirits and dreaming', puzzling to the missionary community where he had met the artist, but which seemed to Eads 'not at all a strange thing for one seeking to be rooted in his own African heritage'.[41] While also addressing the sense of social anguish in his prints, Karel Nel's 1990 essay takes account of Shilakoe's 'inner world and his sense of transcendence' as the artist 'became more and more acutely aware of the ancestral realm', and Nel briefly applies these concepts to his sculptures as well.[42] Eddie de Jager goes so far as to categorise Shilakoe as a 'mystic' in his *Images of Man*, published in 1992, and writes that his art 'does not concern so much earthly existence as the spiritual, transcendental and supernatural dimension'.[43]

While such statements, building on each other, are obviously trying to come to terms with the distinctive qualities of Shilakoe's oeuvre, it seems problematic that they have been often repeated but little explored. There do seem to be visionary elements in his etchings and woodcuts that invite this kind of interpretation, as in the case of *Inspiration from Koko*. Yet in other respects his prints draw rather on contemporary themes, which challenge any attempt to offer a single 'mystical' reading of Shilakoe's work. However, even his works that might be understood as social commentary are far from straightforward representations. Haunting, huddled forms of attenuated figures with bloated heads, glimpsed through vaporous mists, are the hallmarks of his pictorial style. They seem to reflect the deep despair and dislocated lives of black people in South Africa at the time in a very personal way. How do Shilakoe's sculptures relate to these well-known images?

Speaking with silent sculptures

A carving of an apparently androgynous figure in the Fort Hare collection, dated 1972, depicts a form not unfamiliar from Shilakoe's prints. *Standing Figure* with its short torso and limbs is less elongated than most of the print figures, but shares their simplified, often seemingly sexless, silhouette. In the prints, too, figures may have arms that are truncated, even vestigial, or held close against the body, although the compact form here might also be explained as a response to the limitations of the basic shape of the wood. But most obviously related to his two-dimensional figures is the sculpture's dominant round head, large in proportion to the body, and set directly on the shoulders[44] – a form ubiquitous in his prints, though not all Shilakoe's carvings follow this pattern. The face is treated in a rather schematic way, with wide mouth, broad nose with distended nostrils, and small eyes placed very high beneath an

extremely low forehead, so that the features take up the whole frontal area of the head. The configuration is reminiscent of the rather hackneyed stereotypes found in some 'township art', with its melancholic emphasis of negroid features, such as exaggeratedly flat noses and thick lips, emphasising an African identity.[45]

Facial simplification is even more pronounced in another Fort Hare figure, entitled *Lonely*, where the features are mere ciphers, not unlike indentations made by pushing into wet clay with thumb or finger, reducing the face to a form curiously akin to Spielberg's extraterrestrial character, ET, who reached our movie screens some ten years later. The similarity is made even more pronounced by the narrow neck that supports the head in this example. Indeed the whole form seems more tenuous than the other figure, and the arms are extended along the contours of the elongated body, the large hands meeting below the groin. Two forms high on the upper torso are not readily identifiable, perhaps signifying breasts or lungs, and those on the abdomen suggest uterine or genital shapes. The body seems almost a flayed *écorché*, exposing not muscles but organs. This imagery is quite distinct from the Shilakoe prints that I know, where figures are invariably clothed and, while the forms may be broken up, the areas are usually identifiable as garments of some kind, differentiated with texture or decorative pattern. An exception is *The Philosopher,* an etching in which the figure also seems to reveal forms beneath a translucent membrane of skin, which might be associated with the treatment of this sculpture.

The carving of both these Fort Hare figures – and indeed of all the later sculptures that I have seen by Shilakoe – is heavily worked with chisel marks to create a unifying surface. While dissimilar to the treatment of individual figures in Shilakoe's prints, this may provide another point of comparison with them, for the prints display a similar interest in the marks of making, reflected in the textured surfaces of his woodcuts and the grainy aquatints of his etchings that unify his pictorial forms.[46]

Yet, however many points of comparison we can find with the prints, as single figures these two carvings seem to have less potential for the narrative interpretation that is often possible with Shilakoe's two-dimensional art. The title *Lonely* suggests a shared iconography with his disconsolate pictorial images, but it should be noted that titles for Shilakoe's sculptures are contingent. When De Jager first published this sculpture in his *Contemporary African Art in South Africa* in 1973, it was labelled *Coming Out.* In his 1975 article it was merely called *Figure.*[47] It leaves one wondering whether the evocative title *Lonely* might have been given in hindsight by someone familiar with the themes of Shilakoe's prints.

However, Eric Mbatha, who knew Shilakoe when he was making sculptures like these, and exchanged works with him, is insistent that they shared the same kind of subjects as his prints, confirming this in two separate communications. 'Most of his sculptures depicted politics … like urban areas, people being arrested for pass and house permits.' 'He used to do sculptures that depicted sadness. The sense of hopelessness disturbed him deeply. Birth control, Hunger and The Tragedy of the Migratory Labour System became evident in his works.' Rakgoathe too stated that Shilakoe 'saw and felt the suffering of his own people at being victims of a political system beyond their own control'.[48] And a number of Shilakoe's carvings clearly do match these ideas although, as with his prints, he seems to engage more with generic human suffering than specific cases, so that their significance extends beyond the

South African situation.

The sense of pathos in the sculpture called *Dying Child* is in part dependent on the title, as there is little to suggest distress in the infant's face, which follows Shilakoe's customary reductive formula, with even the ears depicted as mere negative indentations. But there is a sense of vulnerability in the small supine figure, seemingly premature with its prehensile fingers and engorged genitals. The prostrate woman in another small carving, *Birth*, more obviously expresses suffering, again not so much through facial expression, but through her pose, with an enlarged hand clamped on her breast, her head thrown back, and her elongated neck stretched in an agonised arch. This expressive figure is reminiscent of Dumile's occasional sculptures made before he left South African in 1968, such as a bronze called *The Scream* in the Fort Hare collection.[49] While quite different in medium and conceptualisation, Shilakoe's splayed form also brings to mind Giacometti's memorable *Woman with her Throat Cut* of 1932, particularly the attenuated, twisted neck. Shilakoe's figure is not the victim of violence, however, but protagonist in the process of birth – although it seems somewhat brutal nonetheless. Between her spread legs a spherical form, as large as her own head, forces its way. The sphere is penetrated by a deep cavity drilled into the wood, inexplicable in relation to an emerging baby, but perhaps referring to the mother's open birth canal.[50]

A similar hole is found in the back of the head of a child that kneels at the feet of a standing woman in *Adult and Child* (previously titled *Mother and Child*),[51] its face pressed into her groin, so that again an analogy with female genitals might be inferred. This seems no conventional mother-child group for, though her pendulous breasts might suggest years of child rearing, the woman does not respond in a maternal way to the supplicant figure at her feet, her large head facing resolutely forward, and her stubby arms remaining at her sides.[52] In contrast, the limbs of the child with enlarged hands and feet are closely entwined around her, echoed in the organic form of her neck ring.

Shilakoe's multiple figure groups can be very challenging to read, as the different forms are enmeshed in inextricable cohesion.[53] It seems unfathomable what exactly is depicted in small groups such as *The Couple* or Durban Art Gallery's *Untitled* work. Perhaps the cohesion of forms is a visual metaphor of the unity of coupling figures, male and female coming together as one, as a symbol of pleasurable harmony. Eads recounted that Shilakoe presented him with a carving of two figures embracing, saying, 'We must always hold on to one another. This is how we will survive. There is always Hope if people come together.'[54] But there is a suggestion of violence and sexual molestation in these interlocked organic forms, reminding the viewer of how the pursuit of contented permanent relationships was often disrupted by the cruel edicts of apartheid, particularly the impositions of forced removal and migrant labour mentioned by Rakgoathe and Mbatha when they commented on Shilakoe's subject matter.

The title of another sculpture, *Long Journey*, might make an overt reference to such situations. This apparently more straightforward pairing of two figures side by side is complicated by the forms depicted on their bodies – seemingly misplaced breasts, testicles and a penis. On the torso of the left-hand figure they conjure up a face reminiscent of Magritte's *Le Viol* of 1934, where a woman's facial features are

substituted by a female torso. Shilakoe's imagery may not imply the violence of rape as Magritte's title does, but it gives his work an erotic overtone that suggests that *Long Journey* cites some rite of passage rather than a mere excursion from one place to another.

Shilakoe's vertical, abstracted *True Love* suggests no straightforward, blissful union either, despite the title.[55] One side, although seemingly framed by a second pair of lengthy arms, depicts arms raised to a face marked by swollen eyes, with the hands covering the mouth in a recognisable gesture of sorrow or fear. The other side is more uncanny with a shrouded simian head above an open torso, exposing what might be a foetal form. In some respects suggestive of petals, with similar implications to a vulva-like Georgia O'Keefe flower, the form's jagged edges also suggest a rapacious gaping mouth with sharp teeth, like those of Picasso's *Woman in a Garden* of 1929-30, a metal assemblage incorporating similar invocations of uterine organs and genitalia. I make these comparisons with western artists not to propose sources for Shilakoe – although he might have had knowledge of them, for students at Rorke's Drift were encouraged to explore images in art books – but to suggest that some of the themes he developed from his own experience had universal currency amongst twentieth-century artists.

Another western analogy might be drawn in the case of Shilakoe's *Totem* forms, which may be considered the major works of his sculptural oeuvre, both because they were a repeated theme, and because they included his only known monumental pieces, over two metres tall.[56] These are reminiscent of the vertical emphasis of Brancusi's *Endless Column* of 1937. *Totem Pole* by Shilakoe, which I know only in an illustration,[57] is made up of informally shaped units, one above the other, within a rectilinear upright form that follows the contours of what I assume was an originating railway sleeper, though shaped at the apex. But this sculpture is not limited to repeated geometric rhythms like the Brancusi. Each element in the Shilakoe is a concave depression enfolding a series of diverse organic shapes that conjure up coiled and compressed bodies, foetuses and genitalia. The sequence of image piled on image suggests another comparison that is also invited by the work's title – the totem poles of native American carvers, with which Shilakoe's work shares the concept of vertically composed stylised figural forms. And there are many African examples of superimposed figures, such as the Cameroon posts already mentioned above that he might have seen illustrated in *African Arts*.

Shilakoe's *Totems* have a distinctive style and intricate, individualised subject matter. The examples illustrated in *African Arts*, when Shilakoe's first prize for graphic art was announced, show an intriguing conflation of patterned areas with organic representational forms, sometimes free, sometimes sunk into the surface of the wood.[58] They are inscribed with enigmatic titles on the face of the carvings – *Only Holes will Remain* and *They Came and Left Footprints*.[59] Although only one side is visible, the frontal form of the photographs suggests that they might be like the Fort Hare examples, where one face of the carving is flat, the other more organically carved.[60]

The silhouette of the taller *Untitled Totem* at Fort Hare stands slightly off the vertical, avoiding the rectilinear, and the worked surface of the organic form is alive with small raised knobs chiselled into the wood, not unlike the raised *amasumpa* on Zulu

pots, but closely grouped to cover the entire surface with a compelling three-dimensional texture. Also carved on its face are two human forms, one crouching, one a back view, trapped within the seething surface which seems to press in upon them. In the other Fort Hare *Totem*, inscribed *It's Heavy*, the reverse of the work remains largely planar, although it is inscribed with linear forms like a compacted visage caught in a deep collar[61] and a trailing tail-like appendage. The front is deeply cut, however, the curvilinear contours defined by the limbs and bodies of two figures, a taller one below, a smaller one above. But this is no straightforward representation of an acrobatic pair, one on the shoulders of the other. Additional figures seem implied and the two main figures are expressively distorted, the lower extended, the upper compressed, and both lack fully developed heads. The lower one ends with a phallic neck within an enclosing organic shape, which may represent another figure as it is carved with a schematic face, while the upper has two ample breasts framing the vestigial head, perhaps again implying another presence.[62]

Rather than more conventional single figures or groups, Shilakoe uses multiple forms in these works, requiring one to comprehend them cumulatively. The unexpected and ambiguous juxtapositions that result provoke constantly shifting readings, suggesting metamorphosis and growth. So too does the organic nature of the whole: with the apex of the *Totems* rounded, not squared off like cut timber, their vertical thrust reads as a powerful phallic symbol of procreation.

Some of Shilakoe's works known as *Totems* are of a size with his other carvings. The one at the Tatham Art Gallery inscribed *It's Painful* is 49 cm high, that at the Johannesburg Art Gallery 69 cm. Like the second Fort Hare *Totem*, the latter has a relief surface of hemispherical protrusions. With their unevenly chiselled surfaces and irregular size they seem to form more than simply a textured surface, the larger knobs in particular suggesting heads or other body parts. One side of the carving has a reserved flat section, incised with lines not unlike the treatment of the reverse of *It's Heavy*, here suggesting a sutured wound, or perhaps an exposed spinal cord. Lowered into the surface of the other side, in an elongated oval depression like an aura, is an amorphous figure, its surface marked with negative scooped marks that reverse the raised textures on the surface of the sculpture as a whole. The forms are powerfully evocative, yet profoundly enigmatic, resisting unambiguous readings. Is this nebulous figure unformed because as yet unborn, perhaps, or is it mummy-like implying death?[63]

That these two states of being might coexist was evidently not an impossibility to Shilakoe. People who knew him recount his belief that physical life was only one manifestation of our being, and that reincarnation was for him a reality. In her essay in this catalogue Linda Givon writes of how she learnt about these concepts from Shilakoe, and Donvé Langhan raises similar ideas in her discussion of the relationship of Shilakoe with Dan Rakgoathe.

> Like Dan, Cyprian refused to accept the tacitly assumed moral and religious ethos of Rorke's Drift, and together the two friends endeavoured to unearth the sources of their cultural heritage through ancestors, spirits and dreams.
> …..
> Cyprian and Dan shared an essentially mystical view of the world. Both believed in extra-sensory perception, extra-terrestrial life, and reincarnation.

> To their mutual delight, they discovered that they were united by a mystical bond which allowed them to communicate with each other through thoughts and dreams.[64]

The two artists were also linked in their art, where pronounced similarities are to be found. Rakgoathe was nine years older than Shilakoe, already an artist and a teacher when they met, and perhaps the one who recommended that Shilakoe go to Rorke's Drift,[65] so one would expect that he would have had some influence on his friend. Even though we do not have early prints by Rakgoathe to suggest that he had developed printmaking skills at Ndaleni, there are examples in the collection of the ELC Art and Craft Centre that confirm that he made linocuts as far back as 1967 when he first attended the Centre, ahead of the official opening of the Fine Art School. These robustly cut prints would no doubt have impressed the younger Shilakoe. A survey of Rakgoathe's oeuvre suggests that he developed his mature pictorial language at the time when he and Shilakoe were studying together at the Centre and immediately thereafter in the early 1970s when both artists were very productive, and seem to have been close to each other. So there may have been mutual influence, the two exploring ideas and forms simultaneously.[66]

To my eye their prints are less alike, but the heavily worked surfaces of Rakgoathe's linocuts and Shilakoe's sculptures seem to share common interests, both in the emphasis on prolific marks of cutting and scooping their material, whether lino or wood, and a very full use of the format. In contrast to the way Shilakoe employed subtle passages of aquatint that evoke empty misty areas in his etchings, in his sculptures he seems unwilling to leave any part unoccupied, creating vigorous surface effects akin to Rakgoathe's copiously carved print blocks. There also seems to be some resemblance in their subject matter. Apparently less concerned with social comment than his prints, many of Shilakoe's sculptures, particularly his *Totems*, seem to depict forms not dissimilar to Rakgoathe's unearthly personages caught in shifting vortices of spiritual radiance.

When Shilakoe's sculptures were included in his first solo exhibition at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg in 1971, Linda Givon remembers Shilakoe talking about his work to women visitors who were deeply shocked by images which included vaginas and birthing babies. In his opinion, she recalls, western minds found them brutal and ugly because they were unable to come to terms with the ravages of life.[67] It seems pertinent that, when I sent Otto Lundbohm images of some of the works for this exhibition, he had not seen them before, and suspects that Shilakoe may have avoided showing people at the mission works with 'inappropriate' subject matter. The artist was no doubt aware that the sculptures could be contentious.

It is noteworthy that, while there were private sales from his early exhibition, including one to visiting actor Anthony Quinn, none were sold to public collections, and some were given away to friends like Eric Mbatha. Of course very little institutional buying of any of the work of black artists was taking place at the time in South Africa,[68] and the Shilakoe works at the University of Fort Hare, which were in any event not displayed in an art gallery for many years, were sole examples representing his sculpture. The prints, however, did gradually find an appreciative market and became well represented in public collections.

While one can identify areas of commonality, Shilakoe's sculptures generally seem to function in a different register of meaning from his prints. They share some of the affective social themes of his woodcuts and etchings, but they are far more explicit in addressing sexual subject matter and often display a robust eroticism that I have not seen in the etchings or woodcuts. Although forthright, however, his approach relies more on evocative forms than on direct description, possibly because they were intended to operate metaphorically, invoking life forces more as symbols than representations. And the style of the sculptures is distinctive and generally less descriptive than the prints, also suggesting a symbolic rather than a narrative intention. It may well be an approach that derived from what those who knew Shilakoe have perceived as a strong impulse to find a specifically African voice, to develop a visual language to speak of what he called 'our philosophy and legends'.

I can only surmise that perhaps carving, with its long history in Africa and a process that he had already begun to explore before he went to Rorke's Drift, seemed to Shilakoe a more fitting medium for this than printmaking, however successful his ventures in this western art form which he learnt at Rorke's Drift. This might also explain why, when his prints are usually signed in the conventional western way with his English forename or initials and his family name, his sculptures are more often signed with his African name.[69] They are simply inscribed 'Mpho'. As remarked by Dan Rakgoathe, who came from the same clan, it seems appropriate that his Pedi name means 'gift'. We can agree with him too that it was tragic that death 'ruthlessly cut down young talent while still at its sweet bloom', [70] and denied Shilakoe the opportunity to pursue his early promise in a long and fruitful career. Not least, it is sadly disappointing that he was never able to carry out the sculpture that he had promised his family he would make for their village from the huge Marula tree that grew near their home.[71] We can only imagine what sculptural conversations such a work might have provoked.

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[1] The two works borrowed from Fort Hare were *Dying Child* and the *Totem* inscribed *It's Heavy*..

[2] I want to acknowledge my debt of gratitude to Jill Addleson, not only for inviting me to write this essay which brought me the pleasure of revisiting Shilakoe's sculpture, but also for her extraordinary generosity and helpfulness in sharing information and providing access to people who had known Shilakoe.

[3] My thanks go to Warren Siebrits, who has handled a number of these sculptures in recent years, and provided helpful information about them.

[4] The earliest publications I am aware of that refer to Shilakoe's sculptural work are Eddie de Jager's *Contemporary African Art in South Africa* (Cape Town: Struik, 1973) and an article by him on the artist in the *South African Panorama* July 1975: 20-21, which include sculptures that are not known to me. There are further unfamiliar sculptures illustrated and referred to in the article on the 1972 prizewinners in *African Arts* IV(2) pp 8-10. It is clear that there must be a number of Shilakoe sculptures than have not come to light for this exhibition, which will provide further rich material for future researchers.

[5] The exciting find of five works that were previously entirely unknown was the result of Shilakoe's sister, Emily Mahlangu, responding to a call in the press for works by him. When I spoke to her initially in April she mentioned two early carvings, but produced the additional works when Jill Addleson and Philippa Hobbs visited her in August 2005. I am particularly grateful to Russell Scott for photographing these works for me and to Philippa, as always, for sharing her invaluable observations and ideas. Nessa Leibhammer too offered helpful insights on *BaPedi Girl.*

[6] I would like to place on record my thanks to Ola Granath and Otto Lundbohm for their courteous responses to my emails of enquiry about Shilakoe during 2005.

[7] The dating of Shilakoe's sculptures is problematic, although Granath's memory of his early use of wood other than Rhodesian teak before mid-1969 probably confirms that the examples we know (with the exception of the pieces owned by his family which will be discussed later) belong to the 1970s, after he had completed his studies. I know of only one example, *Standing Figure* in the Fort Hare collection, which is inscribed with a date, 1972, the year of Shilakoe's death.

[8] Apart from Shilakoe's early carvings in the family collection, which seem to have been made from natural unprocessed wood, I am aware of only one obvious exception, a mother and child, where the smaller figure is at a different angle from the larger, which is illustrated in De Jager 1975: 20. I have no knowledge of the whereabouts of this work today.

[9] It seems that Mbatha arrived some time ahead of the commencement of the 1971 class. Of its four students, Eric Mbatha is the only survivor, as Hugh Nolutshungu and Vuminkosi Zulu have both died,

and Catherine Ndebele seems untraceable. I am very grateful to him for answering my questions, both by fax and through telephone conversations with Jill Addleson. All statements from Eric Mbatha are taken from his correspondence with us in mid-2005.

[10] This seems confirmed as a sleeper section had been kept with Shilakoe's sculptures at the family home in Dennilton.

[11] Lundbohm is unable to remember exactly when and how often Shilakoe made these visits, associated with the preparation of work for exhibitions. Eric Mbatha thought that Shilakoe continued to go to Rorke's Drift 'thrice a year'.

[12] One wonders whether this need may have prompted Shilakoe to buy the Volkswagen Combi in which he was to meet his death. (The vehicle is identified in Langhan 2000: 87.)

[13] Other sculptors who emerged from the Fine Art School at Rorke's Drift were Vuminkosi Zulu, who studied there from 1971-72, Raphael Magwasa (1972), Vincent Baloyi (1974-75) and Chipa Zondi (1977-78). Founder of the Centre, Peder Gowenius, recalled an unusual sculpture by Caiphas Nxumalo, reproduced in Hobbs and Rankin 2003: 175. Bhekisani Manyoni and Ephraim Ziqubu, who were associated with the ceramic workshop not the Fine Art School, also made a number of sculptures when they later worked at Katlehong. It is perhaps an indication of the strong Rorke's Drift emphasis on two-dimensional artwork, particularly printmaking, that the number of sculptors is low compared to other mission-related centres such as Grace Dieu, Ndaleni, Thaba 'Nchu and Tweespruit, where wood carving seems to have been pre-eminent. This may relate to the fact that Gowenius and those that came after him were anxious to avoid any similarity with the craft classes of Bantu education, possibly including carving, which seemed set to entrench traditional skills and deny black students more personal and expressive art making.

[14] The short biographical entry in the *Images of Wood* catalogue offered the accepted description of a childhood spent on a mission station at Bushbuckridge, because neither I nor Elizabeth Dell, research assistant for this section, had reason to question these 'facts', cited in earlier accounts such as those of De Jager (1973), who writes of his youth at Buschbeeskreich (Bushbuckridge), and the catalogue for *Black South African Contemporary Graphics* (Brooklyn Museum, New York, 1976), which adds that he lived in Soweto with his parents after his grandmother's death. This version of Shilakoe's early life is also found in Sack (1988), in Nel (1990) and in Hobbs and Rankin (2003). These accounts demonstrate the ease with which the mythology of art history is established and repeated, as they are firmly rejected by his sister, Emily Mahlangu. She has most patiently answered our questions, for which I thank her sincerely. She places Cyprian's early years with their grandmother in Mathiebastad, and then with their parents in Dennilton. All references about the artist from Emily Mahalangu are taken from my telephone conversations with her in April 2005 and her correspondence with Jill Addleson, who kindly relayed further questions for me.

[15] She does recollect, however, that he received encouragement from his class teacher, Mr Sekele, who visited the family and urged Cyprian to take care of his works and his talent.

[16] The fact that these works seem to have been fired suggests that Shilakoe had access to a kiln, indicating that he might have had contact with a studio or community centre: however, there is nothing to tell us whether they were in fact fired at this early date or later.

[17] This work might well belong to a later period as it seems unlikely that Shilakoe would have been able to move such a heavy piece without transport. It may be pertinent that Vuminkosi Zulu, who was part of the next intake of students at Rorke's Drift, also produced carvings that responded to the shape of the growing tree. Eric Mbatha recalls that the two artists discussed their work when Shilakoe visited Rorke's Drift, although he differentiates their work as 'Natal' and 'Transvaal' styles.

[18] Dating these figures is problematic. In one telephone interview, Emily spoke of *BaPedi Girl* being made while they still lived with their grandmother. However, later she remembered that Shilakoe made no artworks until they lived in Dennilton, and thought that the *Figure with Turned Head* was the earliest work. She has also mentioned that she had not seen all the works until after his death, which implies that some may have been made after Shilakoe left for Rorke's Drift, as he apparently visited Dennilton relatively rarely then.

[19] Emily recounted in a letter to Jill Addleson that her grandmother attended church every Thursday and Sunday, and that at her funeral the pastor said 'Emily was my watch, when I saw her I knew it [was] time for the church'. She has also stated that their parents were devout Christians.

[20] Many examples could be cited, such as the mission church of St Matthew, Seshego, near Grace Dieu, and the numerous pews, altar fronts and crucifixes by carvers trained there which found their way to churches throughout South Africa. Emily recalls images in the church they attended.

[21] As well as confirming Shilakoe's interest in African belief systems, Eric Mbatha writes that, while the family went to church regularly, 'he used to complain that they church too much'.

[22] Anitra Nettleton and David Hammond-Tooke remark on the relatively naturalistic style of the stocky figures, pointing out that details of hairstyle and dress, as markers of status, were of greater importance than anatomical accuracy. (1989: 18)
[23] My thanks to Catherine Vogel, who undertook her MA research amongst the Pedi, for sending me images of Pedi carvings in her collection., including an initiation figure of a female which has a helmet-like cap of hair and somewhat stylized facial features, making it less naturalistic than *BaPedi Girl*, but far more representational than the majority of Shilakoe's carvings.
[24] I am grateful to Julia Charlton for the valuable discussion we had while she was showing me Shilakoe works in the University of the Witwatersrand collections.
[25] Emily Mahlangu does not seem to have been aware of initiation amongst the Pedi, which suggests that that the family followed a Christian life style. She recounted that the boy was circumcised at hospital when he was seventeen, which was presumably related to his returning to his parent's home.
[26] Nettleton and Hammond-Tooke write of the Northern Sotho, of which they call the Pedi the 'dominant group': 'Figurative carvings seem to have been produced only in the context of male initiation lodges and many of these seem to have been carved by the fathers of the initiates and to have been burned at the end of the school.' (1989: 17)
[27] Quoted by Linda Givon in Johnson 1981: 165.
[28] Quoted by Eads 1973: 69.
[29] Shore-Bos 1969: 50.
[30] Gebauer 1972: 29.
[31] Rakgoathe 1971.
[32] Gebauer 1971: 41-49..
[33] Shilakoe evidently sent photographs of sculptures along with his prints which he entered in the competition, and the editor illustrated two of them in the article – *Only Holes will Remain* and *They Came and Left Footprints* – which are labelled as over six foot and carved in Rhodesian teak. He also mentions a work called *Mother Fertility* sold to a museum in Chicago, as being almost life size and weighing two hundred pounds. ('Cyprian Shilakoe' 1973: 8-11.)
[34] See De Jager 1973: plates 118, 121; Rankin 1988: cat 113.
[35] One might speculate whether Sedibane's figures with their sturdy proportions may have been influenced by Pedi initiation figures, providing a possible secondary link to them for Shilakoe.
[36] Langhan (2000: 58-9) notes that they were all part of an informal multiracial artists' group at the time.
[37] Rankin 1989: cat 81
[38] See Rankin 1989: cat 65, although this work is of later date.
[39] Eric Mbatha talks of Shilakoe's grandmother having 'influenced him towards the occult', although her strong Christian leanings might lead one to interpret this statement in a way different from suggestions that Shilakoe drew on Pedi concepts of spirituality.
[40] Rakgoathe 1973: 68. Donvé Langhan discusses Rakgoathe's and Shilakoe's shared interest in African mysticism at some length. (2000: 76-78, 87-88)
[41] Eads 1973: 69.
[42] Nel 1990: 37, 33.
[43] De Jager 1992: 94. This short essay draws heavily on De Jager's 1975 article on Shilakoe. It is interesting that he does not mention the spiritual dimension in Shilakoe's work in his first publication on contemporary black artists in 1973, before Rakgoathe's article, but rather talks of his art as social comment.
[44] This seems a single characteristic shared with the work of Azaria Mbatha, who had returned to Rorke's Drift from Sweden in 1968. His linocuts are quite different in style from Shilakoe's prints, but his far chunkier figures invariably have their heads set directly on their shoulders in this way.
[45] Although best known in two-dimensional art, this form is also found in sculpture, such as Ben Macala's *Mother and Child* that probably dates from the late 1960s. (Sack 1988: plate 51)
[46] The distinctive patterning of repeated, rounded knobs on the surface of many of Shilakoe's sculptures is also reminiscent of scale-like texturing in some prints, such as *Two Blind Ladies.*
[47] De Jager 1973: illustration 101; 1975: 20.
[48] Rakgoathe 1973: 68.
[49] See Sack 1988: cat 19.
[50] There are analogies with *Figure with Turned Head*, which also has an enormous hand clasped to the body as well as a child caught between the legs, so that one might speculate whether this work too relates to birth, despite the standing pose.

[51] The earlier title is recorded in sale details in the file for the work at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. My thanks to the staff there for arranging access to their Shilakoe carvings, and especially to librarian Jo Burger for assistance in tracking material on this and other occasions.
[52] It is tempting to read some of these images autobiographically. Langhan recounts that Shilakoe had told Rakgoathe that he was rejected by his mother (2000: 76-77). But, particularly remembering that it was not uncommon for African children to be raised by their grandmothers, it seems wise to guard against overly personalised readings.
[53] An exception to this is the charming *Three Under One Blanket* where the three figures, top to tail, are unified in a single simple form by the covering blanket, differentiated only by their protruding heads. (See Siebrits 2002.)
[54] Quoted by Eads 1973: 69
[55] In this case the title is definitely Shilakoe's, as it is carved on the underside of the work.
[56] There are five of these monumental pieces that I know of, and two small pieces that have also been dubbed *Totem*. I have adopted the generic title *Totem* to refer to all Shilakoe's sculptures in this group, as it seems to be in common use, but I have found no evidence that the term was used by the artist himself.
[57] De Jager 1973: plate 102.
[58] 'Cyprian Shilakoe' 1973: 9, 11.
[59] A number of Shilakoe's carvings have titles inscribed on them, but most commonly on the back or base of the work.
[60] An emphasis on the front view is apparent in a number of Shilakoe's sculptures, seemingly more like deep reliefs than fully three-dimensional sculptures. And when the back is fully worked, it may be quite different from the front, rather than a back view of the same form, as in *True Love*, for example. A variant of this is the Wits work inscribed *Everlasting Footprint* (and including carved hand- and footprints) on a flat 'backrest' slab, almost like a tombstone, which occupies more than half of the rear view.
[61] This form, reminiscent in its treatment of inscribed print blocks, seems close to some pictorial images of the head set closely into the body in prints such as *Two Blind Ladies* of 1971.
[62] I am most grateful to Niel Nortje for taking photographs and examining the Fort Hare sculptures for me, to refresh my memory of having looked at them so many years ago.
[63] Eric Mbatha, who once owned this sculpture and a second small *Totem* form, says that he thought of them as a male and female pair, and the inset figures as children they were protecting.
[64] Langhan 2000: 77.
[65] Emily Mahlangu points out that their mother came from Nqutu in KwaZulu-Natal, and knew about the Centre, so she may have been the one who brought it to her son's attention. She evidently accompanied him when he first went to Rorke's Drift.
[66] Otto Lundbohm also commented on the similarity of their work in our recent correspondence, and thinks that the two artists influenced one another.
[67] I am grateful to Linda Givon for recounting some of her memories about the artist and this exhibition to me. It was she who recalled a sale of one of the sculptures to Anthony Quinn.
[68] For trends in the collection of the work of black artists by South African galleries, see Rankin 1995.
[69] I have not been able to examine all Shilakoe's sculptural works personally to confirm this. It seems that a number of sculptures are not signed at all, but I know of the following examples inscribed Mpho: *True Love, Long Journey, Everlasting Footprint, Totem: It's Painful, Totem: It's Heavy.* I know of only one inscribed 'Shilakoe', a small *Totem* sculpture owned by Warren Siebrits (which also has the initials MC on the left leg), and another small *Totem* at JAG has a partial signature 'M C Shila…'; these are the two works which were originally owned by Eric Mbatha. My thanks to Sheree Lisoos for checking the inscription and other details for me. In the case of the prints, on the other hand, only one for this exhibition is signed Mpho, although it was occasionally inscribed into the etching plate just as it was inscribed into the wood of his sculptures.
[70] Rakgoathe 1973: 68.
[71] The promise was recounted by Emily Mahlangu, although she remembers no details other than that she thinks it was to be a male figure.