

It's About Art

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Koulla Xinisteris
Curator

CYPRIAN MPHOSHILAKOE (1946 – 1972)



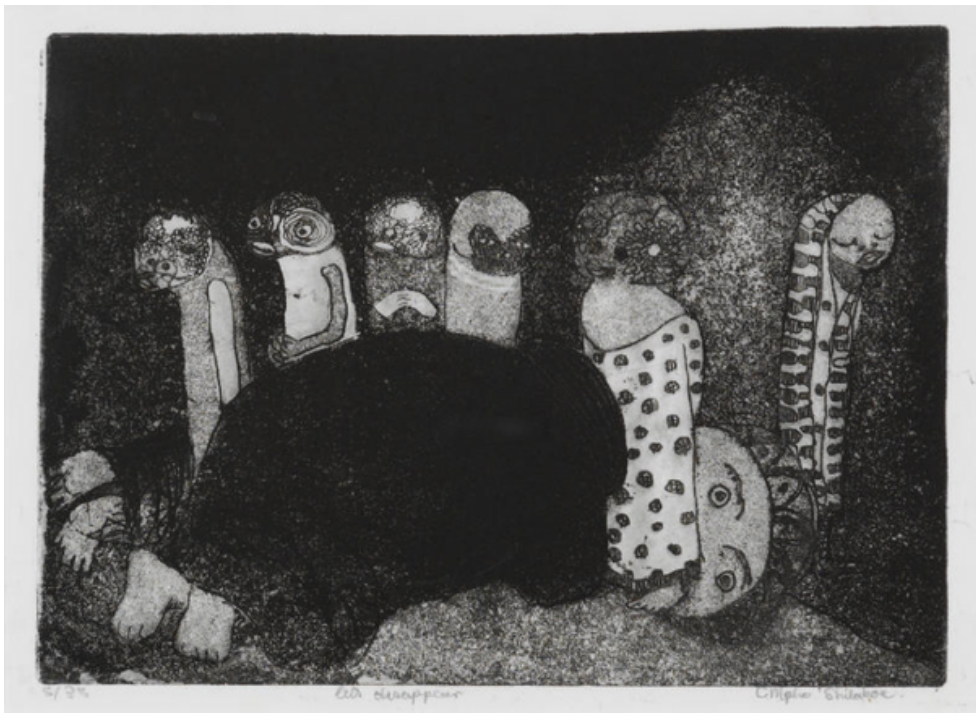
Stop Crying Mother
1969
Etching and aquatint on paper
10/15
23 x 31cm

This work features two figures joined together in sorrow, the most distinct markings drawing attention to the lines in their faces and the tracks of their tears. The mournful mood and misty, ghostly atmosphere is typical of Shilakoe's work. There is a haunting, spiritual quality to his etchings.

Writing on the website Revisions:

Expanding the Narrative of South African Art, Joe Dolby observes that: '... his work has a profound visionary quality. The atmospheric, dream-like effect... is achieved by Shilakoe's masterly use of aquatint. Instead of using it in large, tonal areas, he preferred to apply the aquatint selectively, resulting in the rich, lustrous quality of his prints.'

The ... figures ... are located in a setting which is not descriptive or naturalistic, but one in which the very landscape embodies a sense of loneliness. This otherworldly aspect of Shilakoe's work is tempered by the fact that he also wished to record the events of his time and the experiences of Black people under apartheid, as well as ... their traditional legends and myths. Whereas most of Shilakoe's contemporaries recorded the harsh realities of day-to-day life, he preferred to depict these events in a highly personal and symbolic language.'

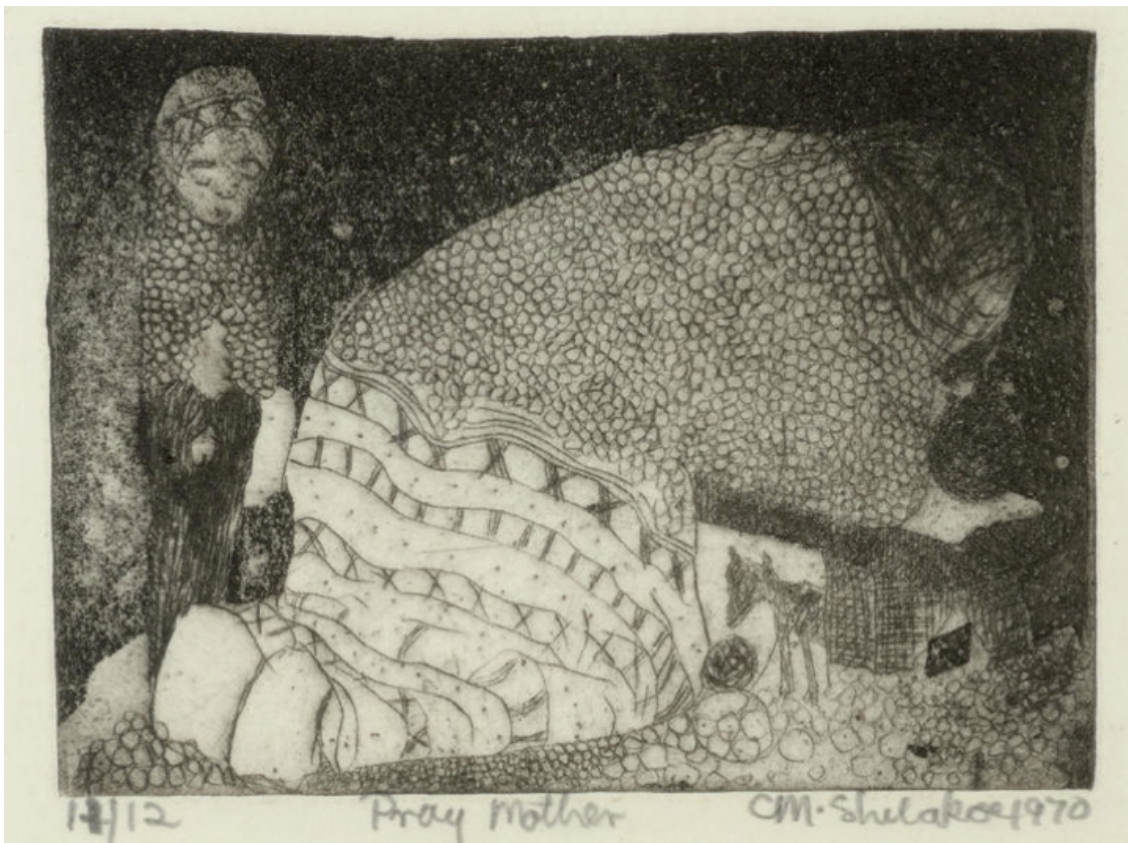


In *Let's Disappear* a figure lies prostrate overcome by six diminutive hovering beings, who although partly human, are also of another world.

Cocoon-like and mildly reptilian, their presence is imbued with a liminal threshold quality.

The absence of visible limbs gives a sense that the central figure is immobilised by the presence of the small figures, one of whom appears to be passing right through him/her. In this depiction of a metaphysical state of transition, nothing is quite as solid as it seems.

Let's Disappear
1970
Dry point etching
3/35
22.5 x 30.5 cm



Pray Mother
1970
Dry point etching
11/12
9.5 x 13cm

In *Pray Mother* a woman is bent over in prayer as her young child looks on. The intricate detail of Shilakoe's mark-making is evident in the patterns of the cloth draped around her.

The mood is sombre, and the delicacy of lines and textures adds to the tenderness of the the artist's portrayal of the moment. A small animal in the light of a doorway peers in on the scene – another tender feature of this poignant work. – *Alexandra Dodd*



Cyprian Mpho Shilakoe was born in Barberton in 1946. He grew up at Bushbuckridge mission station with his grandmother as his parents were migrant workers. When she died in 1962, he moved to Soweto. From 1968–9, he studied under Azaria Mbatha at the Rorke's Drift art centre [Kwa-Zulu] Natal, and was the first student to excel in intaglio printmaking. He then went on to set up a studio at St Ansgar's Lutheran mission station near Roodepoort, with a printing press acquired with the help of Otto Lundbohm, his Swedish teacher at Rorke's Drift. Shilakoe had a close working relationship with fellow artist Dan Rakgoathe. His first exhibition was at Goodman Gallery in 1970.

He died in a car accident in 1972 just as he was about to be awarded first prize in printmaking at an exhibition at UCLA (the University of California Los Angeles). In his tragically short artistic career, his creative output was enormous – he produced about 80 prints and a number of wooden sculptures within the space of about three years.

He was awarded the Standard Bank National Arts Festival's third guest artist award retrospectively in 1990.

From 2006 to 2008, the exhibition *Cyprian Shilakoe Revisited* travelled to ten South African art museums, including the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Museum, and [Iziko] South African National Gallery.

This exhibition featured a substantial body of the artist's prints, sculptures and paintings, as well as eight early works never before shown on public exhibition. In preparation for the exhibition, curator, Jill Addleson and Phillipa Hobbs travelled to Dennilton to meet with the Shilakoe family. In the family home, they discovered two clay sculptures, two acrylic-on-masonite paintings completed when Shilakoe was training at Rorke's Drift, and three wood sculptures. A comprehensive catalogue was published in tandem with the exhibition, featuring essays by curator Jill Addleson, Linda Givon, Phillipa Hobbs, Otto Lundbohm, Elizabeth Rankin and Yvonne Winters.

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