

# TWO PROMINENT BLACK ARTISTS

By Prof E. J. de Jager

## CYPRIAN SHILAKOE

Cyprian Shilakoe was born on August 3, 1946. He spent his childhood on an isolated mission station, at Buchbeesreich, in the Transvaal. In 1968 he started studying art at Rorke's Drift in Natal. This marked the beginning of a promising career which ended tragically when the artist was killed in a motor-car accident on September 7, 1972.

Shilakoe was both a graphic artist and sculptor. His graphics included lino cuts, etchings and aquatints. His work is exhibited in most of the large centres of South Africa as well as Sweden, Denmark, West Germany, Italy and the USA. Shortly after his death news was received that he had won first prize for graphic art at the African Art exhibition held in Los Angeles in 1972. Entries were submitted from throughout Africa.

On viewing Shilakoe's graphic art one is immediately aware of an inherent, deep, inner and spiritual vision. Strong surrealistic qualities form the basis of his work. His canvasses are populated by people — adults and children — who feature predominantly as dream images. They symbolise loneliness and contemplation, and are executed with an almost painful sensitivity.

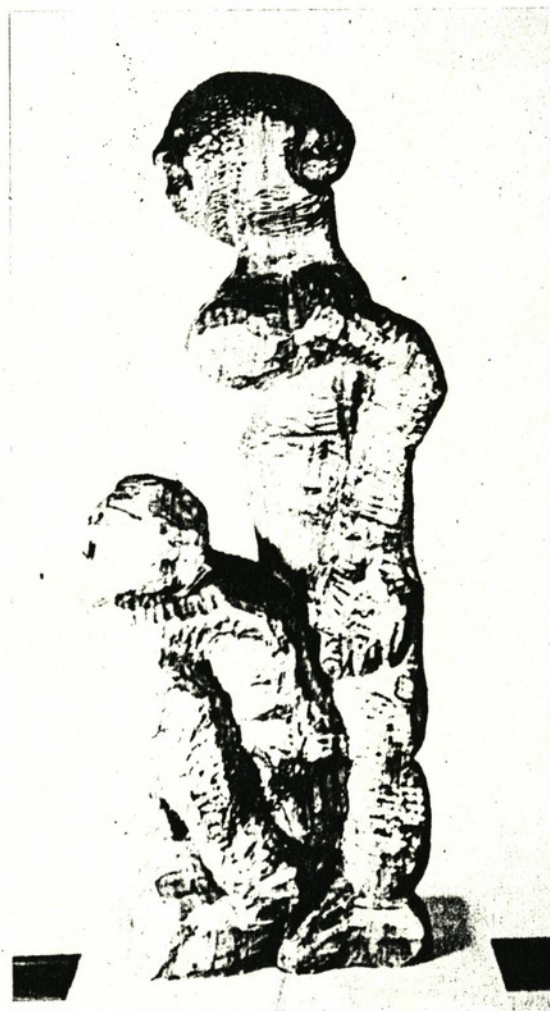
As is the case with many Black artists Shilakoe's work contains elements of social realism. Yet he uses the social situation and circumstances solely as a catalyst to transcend to what he regards as the most profound human realities, values and truths. His art becomes a personal vision of spiritual contemplation in which extra sensory perception and mystical awareness are apparent. This does not concern earth-

ly existence so much as the spiritual, transcendental and supernatural dimension.

His graphic work is marked by a characteristic style and technique. His figures are imbued with qualities of urgency, loneliness and isolation. This



Above: C. Shilakoe: "Coming Out". Rhodesian Teak, 48 cm. Collection: University of Fort Hare



Right: C. Shilakoe: "Mother and Child". Rhodesian Teak, 46 cm





is supplemented by his application of dark and sombre tones which range from black to white with countless greys inbetween. His etchings and aquatints, compiled with a large variety of textures which are achieved in a delicate manner, consist of a large variety of pattern designs. These elements of his style and technique are well integrated with and supported by the spiritual and comprehensive values of his art.

Shilakoe's sculpture is a three-dimensional continuation of his graphic work. Predominant themes are death and re-incarnation in terms of ancestral worship and indigenous beliefs concerning the life-cycle of the individual. This theme is well developed in a series of totem poles, all of which are two metres high, or higher. His sculptures are exclusively executed in wood. The entire surface is utilised.

The elements of isolation, loneliness and urgency are also found in the sculptures. Shilakoe's sculpture is likewise the spiritualisation of human existence using strong symbolic qualities and, like his graphics, is of a narrative nature.

Cyprian Shilakoe's death was a great loss to South African art.



Above left: C. Shilakoe: "Figure". 1968. Etching. 38 x 24 cm. Collection: University of Fort Hare

Above: M. Dumile: "Kwa Mashu". Crayon drawing. 1966. Composition for a sculpture

## DUMILE

Mslaba Zwelidumile Mxgasl, better known as Dumile, is one of Africa's greatest contemporary artists. He was born in 1942 at Worcester, in the Cape Province. After his mother's death in 1948 the family moved to Cape Town and later, when Dumile was 11 years old, to Johannesburg.

His exceptional talent was first noticed in 1964 while he was receiving

treatment at a hospital in Johannesburg. A year later Gallery 101 sponsored him and in 1966, he gave his first one-man exhibition in the Golden City. In 1968 he went abroad where he has lived ever since.

This artist has numerous one-man shows to his credit; at the Republic Art Festival (1966), the Transvaal Academy (1967), the Grosvenor Gallery, London (1968) and the Contemporary Africa Art Exhibition, London (1969). In



Right: M. Dumile: "Harpy". Charcoal drawing P.C.

Below: M. Dumile: "Figurative Group 1965". Chalk drawing, 80 x 65 cm. Collection: University of Fort Hare



1967 he represented South Africa at the Sao Paulo Biennale. Dumile's work has been acquired for a great many local public collections including the South African National Gallery in Cape Town, the Durban Art Gallery and the Pretoria Art Museum, as well as many private collections. Dumile is also represented in the USA, Britain, Belgium, Sweden, Israel and other overseas countries.

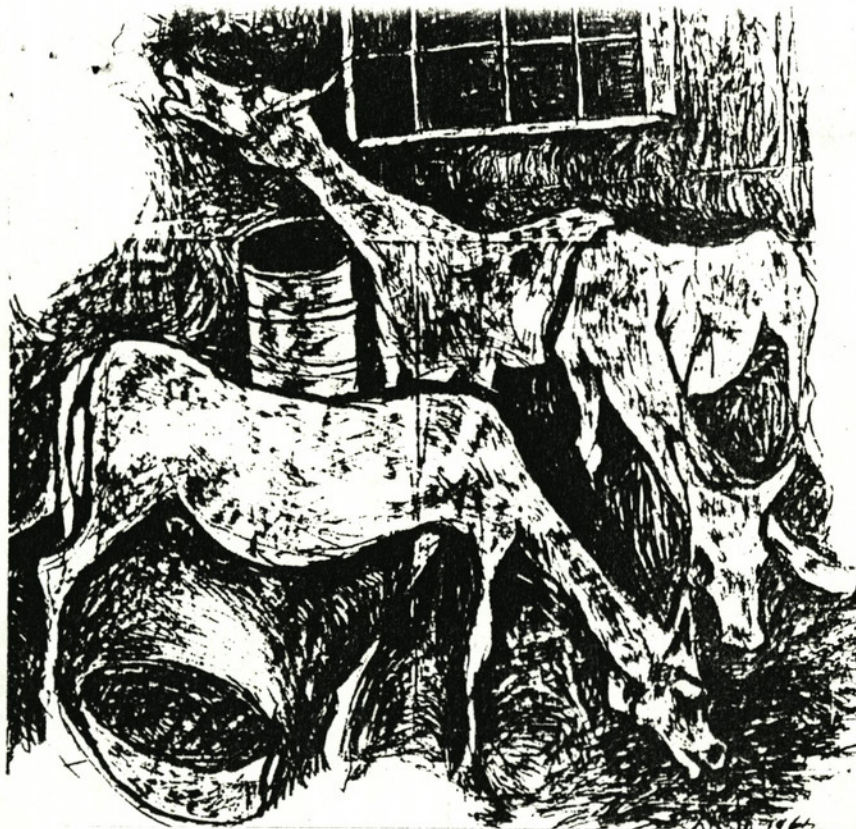
Dumile is both a sculptor and a graphic artist. It is his graphics especially which have won him the greatest acclaim. The content of these, mostly drawings, is strongly based on social realism dealing chiefly with the social conditions and problems affecting the Black man's identity in an urban environment.

His art, which reveals certain morbid undercurrents, is characterised by a distortion stemming from tremendous emotion. To a great extent this work belongs to the art of the fantastic. The tremendous vitality of this work, which is very contemporary, appears to be drawn from the artist's subconscious; a large number of these drawings therefore contain strong elements of the subconscious. The drawings are marked by their freedom from the limitation of reason and absence of any aesthetic preoccupation. The viewer gets the impression that they were executed spontaneously in accordance with the artist's subconscious thought and vision. Yet they are quite comprehensible and it is these very qualities which imbue the drawings with such significance.

The human figure is of prime importance in Dumile's drawings as is the successful manner in which these figures give utterance to emotions and feelings. By means of their posture, gestures, rhythm — in short, pattern of body structure — they express inner and psychic experiences. The figure is often apocalyptic in appearance and the distorted style in which they are drawn fulfils a specific function, namely, heightening the sensation of the emotions they depict. The "Instinct" of Dumile's art is apparent in these sketches which communicate his emotions in intelligible language.

Dumile's art is undoubtedly a serious and meaningful commentary on the city life of the Black man. It is indicative





Left: M. Dumile: "Animals". Crayon drawing 1966. 112 x 103,5 cm. Collection: South African National Gallery, Cape Town

Below left: M. Dumile: "African Guernica" (detail). Charcoal. Collection: University of Fort Hare



and symbolic of subconscious yearning and desires for the pastoral dimension of human existence as well as the past. The greatness of his art lies in his ability to transcend his immediate environment into a universal reflection and visual account of technical, industrial and urban life.

Although technically far from perfect, these drawings derive their gripping quality from the spontaneity and passion with which they were executed. They obviously originated, and were drawn, during intensely emotional moments. There is often complete lack of perspective and depth in these works, therefore excluding all elements of reality and contributing visually to heightening the essentials, in this case the symbolic meaning and the expressiveness of the drawings.

Dumile's art is entirely original in concept and execution. He can be justly regarded as one of the founders of so-called "suburban art". His art must not be regarded as nihilistic. These drawings have a more deep-seated meaning. They are images of human existence and suffering as Dumile sees it — metaphysical expressions of the subconscious. They manifest the artist's awareness of the link between art and life, beauty and violence, love and sorrow.

His art has a compelling quality which draws the viewer back, again and again. It has a deep and sincere motive, to experience, to feel and to know.