

Tribute to a special woman, Abigail Nosapho Ncokazi: 1930-2001

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This tribute to maternal grandmother of co-author Litha Ncokazi is based on his childhood memories of growing up in the Transkei, Eastern Cape, in South Africa. Aspects of these recollections have in turn served as a reminder that there is generally an ongoing need for transformations of male consciousness around gender issues and for men to take up roles as catalysts contributing to constructive social change with regard to improving ways in which women are respected and treated in contemporary southern African society. Ceramic artworks featured in this article are selected from the Litha Ncokazi Graduation Exhibition, Ann Bryant Gallery, East London, 2006. John Steele supervised Litha Ncokazi's B. Tech studies. They collaborated to produce this article which has been divided into three sections, each of which has been indicated at the beginning by a drop cap. Steele has mainly authored the introductory section, then Ncokazi [who uses the personal pronoun "I"] has provided commentary on his artworks in the main section, then both authors have arrived at a joint conclusion.

Key Words: ceramic sculpture, Eastern Cape, male attitudes towards women

Imbeko kwiNkosikazi ekhethekileyo, u Abigail Nosapho Ncokazi: 1930-2001

Le mbeko eya ku makhulu kwicala likanina wombhali ngentsebenziswano u Litha Ncokazi imiliselwe kwiinkumbulo zokukhula kwakhe ekhulela e Transkei, kwele Mpuma Koloni, e Mzantsi Afrika. Iinkalo zezinkumbulo zithe zasebenza njengesikhumbuzo ngokuthe gabalala kwisidingo esiqhubekekayo sotshintsho kwizazela zamadoda kwimiba emalunga nesini ukuze futhi amadoda athabathe uxanduva njengamagosa anegalelo kutshintsho olwakhayo kwezintlalo nasekuphuculweni kwendlela apho amakhosikazi azuza intlonipho nempatho eyiyo kuMzantsi Afrika omstha. Imisebenzi yodongwe obunjiweyo evelayo apha kule ncwadi ithatyathwe kumsebenzi ka Litha Ncokazi Womboniso woThweso Sidanga, owawubanjelwe kwindlu yomboniso womsebenzi wenkcubeko i Ann Bryant, e Monti, ngomnyaka we 2006. U John Steele nguye owayengumhlohli oncedisa u Litha Ncokazi kwimfundo yakhe enomsila i B. Tech kwezeNkcubeko. Bebobabini basebenzisene ekuveliseni lencwadi ethe yahlulwa yaneziqendu ezithathu, ziqendu ezo zibonakala ukuqaleni kwaso ngasinye ngokuba kusetyenziswe unobumba omkhu othotyweyo. U Steele yena ubhale ngokwakhe yedwa isiqendu sentshayelelo, waze u Ncokazi [osebenzisa isimelabizo sokwalatha u "Mna"] wanikeza ingxelo ngemisebenzi yakhe ebunjiweyo kwisiqendu esiyintloko, baza bebobabini ababhali aba bafikelela kuluvo olunye ngesiphelo.

Amagama Angundoqo: umfanekiso wodongo obunjiweyo, Mpuma Koloni, isini, nkcubeko, itliziyo yamadoda ngabantu ababhinqileyo

During 2006 South Africans, and others, commemorated the 50th Anniversary of the 1956 Women's March on the Union Buildings when approximately 20 000 women protested against apartheid's oppressive "pass laws" (figure 1) which restricted the movement of ordinary people by stipulating confinement to region of birth unless a "pass" had been issued to allow presence in a designated "whites only" area. Those unjust "pass laws" have since been rescinded, but now South Africans, especially women, face different challenges. On 9th August 2006 a Daily Dispatch (p. 9) newspaper editorial succinctly summarised ongoing contemporary oppression of women with reference to the 1956 Women's March as follows: "The hated 'pass' ... is long gone as South Africans [now] choose to live, work and travel where they wish. But for the majority of women in South Africa today there is a new kind of pass, a pass enforced not by reference books and bigoted, cruel laws, but by misogynistic savagery – by the very men in whose support they marched 50 years ago".

Just as the then Prime Minister of South Africa, Hans Strijdom, failed to meet women marchers of 1956 to receive their petition at the Union Buildings (Williams-De Bruyn 2006: 5) and thereafter reinforced a trend of ever repressive laws, so does powerful patriarchy in South Africa today seem to frequently obstruct fundamental rights of "freedom, justice and security"

(Daily Dispatch 2006, August 9: 9) to women and children. Such obstruction can be seen, for instance, in spirals of violence that become a different kind of “*dompas* ... which prevents women from walking alone at night, being at home without the doors locked and windows barred” (Daily Dispatch 2006, August 9: 9).



Figure 1
20000 women marched on the Union Buildings in Pretoria in protest
against oppressive “pass laws” on 9th August 1956.
Photo: I Schadeberg (google image).

Yet South Africa now has a Constitution and laws that enshrine personal safety, and which aim at redress of previously rampant gender based inequalities (Haffajee 2006: 28). But, just as male abuse of women and children continues to plague society, so do women as yet only occupy a relatively small percentage of, for example, both political (33% of the South African Cabinet – Light, Baloyi & Theron 2006: 1) and corporate leadership positions. With regard to women in business Judi Nwokedi (2006: 3) has noted that “true success stories remain isolated instances”, observing, as of August 2006, that “while women make up 52% of the adult population in South Africa and 41% of the working total population, they constitute only 16.8% of all executive managers and only 11.5% of all directors in the country”.

Such women as those who have achieved public and corporate visibility are, according to Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (2006: 25) “trailblazers” whose “stories are celebrated”, and can be contrasted with most women “who remain largely unacknowledged ... whose visibility is [usually] confined to the communities they serve”, much like many of the 20 000 marchers whose names are unknown, but whose presence gave weight and substance to the petitions handed over by leadership of that 1956 march on the Union Buildings.

It is just such a woman, who would not ordinarily be publicly visible, who is celebrated in the *Life & Time* series of artworks created by young male sculptor, Litha Ncokazi. Being a first language Xhosa speaker growing up at Ngcobo in the Transkei, Eastern Cape, Ncokazi inevitably found himself in a patrilineal social milieu — as has been more extensively elaborated on, for example, in Dase, Sotewu & Steele (2007: 66,67; Kuckertz 1990: 161; Peires 2003: 8,33) — and counts himself fortunate to have grown up in an enabling environment ruled by love, overseen by his grandmother. In creating this body of work Ncokazi has decisively distanced himself from sometimes abusive patriarchy. He has chosen instead to take up a position that recommends gentleness and acknowledges the important role his grandmother, Abigail Nosapho Ncokazi, played in his upbringing, and has gone against a pattern of behaviour

which, sometimes even unwittingly, has seen men causing harm to women in South Africa. In our real-world South Africa, characterised so extensively by violence and selfishness, it is salutary that such an exquisitely gentle and lyrical body of artworks devoted to his grandmother specifically, and to constructive women generally, has seen the light of day.

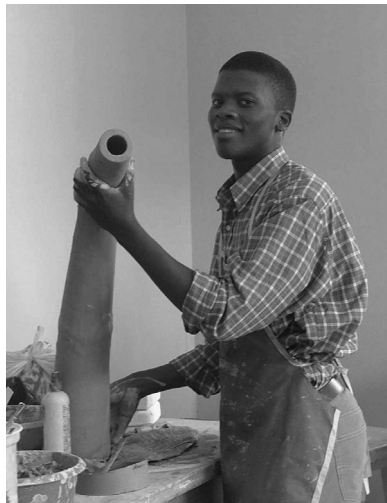


Figure 2
Litha Ncokazi in studio, 2005. Photo: Unknown passer-by.

Using a combination of throwing and modelling construction techniques (figure 2), enhanced by engraving and application of various slips and oxides, Ncokazi has created a body of work that features symbols ranging from musical instruments, eggs, hands and whole-grains to loudspeakers. His subject matter roams from thoughts of rootedness within a loving family, to the era within which his grandmother grew up, to his own youth, and to visual expressions of appreciation of her encompassing strength and compassion, so it is appropriate at this point to hand over to Litha who will provide background to his oeuvre and driving motivations.

In thinking about the strongly formative role my grandmother, Abigail Nosapho Ncokazi [figure 3] has played in my life, I [Litha Ncokazi] came to realise that there are many unrecognised women out there who refused to be overshadowed and overcome by cultural, political and socio-economic constraints. I salute and pay homage to these women as much as to my grandmother, and also recognise the important role played by certain men who, contrary to common practice at the time, encouraged their daughters to go to school and get an education. The importance of such educational opportunities being made available to females was brought home to me by the fact that my grandmother, who was born in 1930 and grew up at Bholothwa in the Qeqe region of Idutywa district of Transkei, was encouraged to attend school at Blythswood by her father, and eventually to become a teacher in the early 1950s at Cwecweni, which is where I was born.

In 1955 she married fellow teacher Mr Pritchard Sicelo Ncokazi (figure 4) and, as was the custom of the time, she resigned her teaching post so as to dedicate herself full-time to household matters. Having lived a long life, 1930-2001, she experienced times of political and social repression, particularly after 1948 when the Nationalist Government assumed power, yet also enjoyed liberation at the time of South Africa's first democratic general election in 1994. One of my strongest childhood memories is that no matter what the circumstances she would be one who contributed substantially to the warmth and kindness to be found among my family members. She also often expressed compassion for others, and had a strong sense of right and wrong. To me she is a heroine who, on occasions, faced unbearable challenges yet

prevailed because of perseverance and tolerance rather than by enforcing her will using violent or overbearing tactics.



Figure 3
Grandmother Abigail Nosapho Ncokazi in the 1950s,
soon after her marriage. Photo from family album.



Figure 4
Grandfather Pritchard Sicelo Ncokazi, far right, with brothers in law. Photo from family album.

The work *Life, Time* (figure 5) celebrates these aspects of my grandmother's life, and also the joy that I came to discover which was triggered by an understanding that her exemplary conduct was a result of her being someone who had centralised God in her life. The egg, used in conjunction with a clock and loudspeakers, refers to fragilities of life which can be stabilised by ways of thinking focussed on others rather than self. Her beliefs resulted in high standards of moral conduct, even during times of adverse circumstances. This opinion that travails can be overcome using gentleness rather than force rubbed off on me, and this theme is a focus of *Enjoyment* (figure 6) wherein one layer of ideas being alluded to includes that I have always sought to obtain maximum enjoyment whenever I am busy on an artwork, hence the featuring of saxophone keys, violin strings and drums because the making of each of my artworks was like playing musical tunes. Such tunes as came to mind also helped me recall memories of the past and immerse myself in clayforming activities of the present, great joy being experienced in seeing ideas being made tangible by means of my own hands. I also sometimes suffered

when it seemed impossible to execute a potential image, yet relentless determination usually prevailed whenever I felt stuck, and forms developed which at least partly expressed what was intended. This artwork also reflects upon the example set by my grandmother who lived her life in a determinedly constructive manner. She found enjoyment despite times of difficulty and melancholy.



Figure 5
Life, Time 90cm x 27cm. Photo: Steyn.



Figure 6
Enjoyment 87cm x 25cm. Photo: Steyn.



Figure 7
Isibane (Lamp) 55cm x 35 cm. Photo: Steyn.



Figure 8
Ikatara (Guitar) 76cm x 27cm. Photo: Steyn.

Abigail Nosapho Ncokazi’s paths of living her life were like a light to me, and it is from that idea that the work *Isibane (Lamp)* (figure 7) germinated. It is based on the type of lanterns that we used before Coleman and other kinds of paraffin lamps became readily available. Such lamps were made of dried cow dung mixed with animal fat which burned very well, giving off both light and warmth. My swirling hints at flames in this work is partially echoed by the suppleness of multiple musical cadences in *Ikatara (Guitar)* (figure 8), which like *Isibane (Lamp)*, also refers to ingenuity of people in olden days who could create lamps out of easily available materials as well as musical instruments out of discarded oil cans.

Music played an important part in our family life, and I return to variants on resonant harmonies and rippling rhythms of recognisable symbols and musical elements throughout my body of work, which also reflects on some of the hostilities our family experienced under apartheid rule in South Africa. In, for example, *Arrogance* (figure 9) I use symbols of frog (thought of as being cheeky and obstinate) combined with Roman helmet (representing warlike aggression), an egg (referring to fragile embryonic life of those deprived of basic human rights), fire (symbolising painful torment experienced under this regime), and a document (indicating repressive laws) to talk about arrogance of apartheid regime leaders and foot-soldiers who imposed segregation and deprivation against black citizens. Phylcia Oppelt (2007: 7) has commented that social systems in place as well as apartheid “kept women – particularly African women – at the bottom of society’s food chain ... [as] ... the food provider, the child-bearer, the cleaner and the obedient sexual partner”. It is such arrogance that does not have a rightful place in South Africa anymore.



Figure 9
Arrogance 93cm x 28cm, 2 views. Photos: Steyn.



Figure 10
Bantu Education 86cm x 30cm, 2 views. Photos: Steyn.

Furthermore, in *Bantu Education* (figure 10) I refer directly to deprivations experienced under the label of such so-called education, yet also manage to raise a wry smile at the absurdity of a system, which I depict here, whereby many of my peers and I were judged ready for admission into primary school not on the grounds of intellectual readiness but on whether we could touch our left shoulders with our right hands, arms over heads!

Moving back to events more specifically relating to memories of my grandmother, I fondly recount in *Magnificent Soprano I and II* (figures 11 and 12) stories that I heard at a young age about the times when she was being courted by my grandfather. He was choir master at the Cwecweni Junior Secondary School where they both taught, and managed to achieve her company under the guise of needing to get her to help in training this choir. It has been recounted that she was a sublime soprano singer, and that he became perfectly entranced in her presence.



Figure 11
Magnificent Soprano I 97cm x 70cm.
Photo: Steyn.



Figure 12
Magnificent Soprano II 98cm x 16cm.
Photo: Steyn.

A different focus on her presence is referred to in *Resonance* (figure 13), so named for the wonderfully promising “ghru, ghru, ghru” sound of stone on stone when she was grinding maize or sorghum. The promise of tasty food prepared by her in the near future once the grinding process had been completed has left a lasting feeling of great expectation whenever I hear that sound.

Another delightful recollection is featured in *Ityesi* (figure 14) which arises out of my grandmother’s habit of locking special things away in a large trunk. One such special thing was her Omega radio which was locked in this trunk whenever she went away for a few days. She said that she did this in order to ensure that the batteries would not be flat when she returned. On one occasion when she went away for a few days she locked this radio away in the trunk, but had forgotten to turn it off, so the rest of the family had a musical trunk for those days, and needless to say the batteries were totally flat when she arrived back.

On a more serious note, however, in *Ablaze* (figure 15) I recall events that transpired when I was about four years old. I, foolishly and against all instructions, played with matches. Things

went completely wrong, resulting in a misadventure that ended up in me being responsible for accidentally burning down my grandmother’s homestead, to which I am embarrassed to say, I only confessed culpability two decades later.



Figure 13
Resonance 64cm x 43cm. Photo: Steyn.



Figure 14
Ityesi 37cm x 23cm. Photo: Steyn.



Figure 15
Ablaze 112cm x 43cm. 2 views. Photos: Steyn.

Despite the event of having a homestead reduced to ashes, and other setbacks, *Music* (figure 16) of one form or another was ever-present in the household, inspiring movement, progress, joy and excitement. Abigail Nosapho Ncokazi played a critically formative and encompassing nurturing and leadership role in my life, which is further acknowledged in *Covered* (figure 17) wherein the fluid upwardly flowing elements of *Music* are simplified into representations of self, in the smaller figure, protected by grandmother who channels energy from without thereby strengthening inner resolve, an empowering role that I attest she played to perfection.

Then, in *Silent sounds* (figure 18) I created a relatively flat work of assembled tiles featuring inlaid script of part of a poem written by myself that refers to my sense of respect for her wisdom-embedded lifestyle, expressed by saying that her influence was subtle yet penetrating: “These sounds were never loud, but were rather a silent whisper to those who took heed. Can you not hear the echo nor feel the resonance? Then you better look around”. Thereafter, in the final work of this series, seeking an essence of simplicity in four vessels, I chose to speak more

generally by likening good and strong women to *Eagles* (figure 19), thereby acknowledging such characteristics as capacity for far-sightedness and an ability to attack mercilessly as well as to endure adversity, all combined with abilities to survive, nurture, and to soar gracefully and effortlessly.



Figure 16
Music 77cm x 50cm. Photo: Steyn.



Figure 17
Covered 81cm x 40cm. Photo: Steyn.



Figure 18
Silent Sounds 103cm x 70 cm. Photo: Steyn.



Figure 19
Women as Eagles 122cm x 95cm. Photo: Steyn.

We [Ncokazi and Steele] are aware that the qualities mentioned above are indeed idealised, but we hope that nonetheless the presence of this body of artworks, and motivations as expressed in the accompanying text of this article, will at least prod some male consciences towards unremitting respect for women, and in so doing make a statement that encourages transformation of some male attitudes. Other males, such as Mbulelo Dyasi, are also making such statements, but in different ways. Dyasi, who is officer for prevention and education at the Masimanyane Women’s Support Centre in East London, when recently asked a question about what it would be if there was one thing he could change about his city replied that “I would ensure that

men are not a threat to women and children” (Lumko 2008: 2). Such ways of thinking, when coupled with other initiatives by males such as that of Mko Mashoba who heads the NGO “Men for Change” (which focuses on conscientization of men in the Eastern Cape around issues of gender based violence), lead us to hope that even though constructive change in men’s attitudes towards women may be very slow, such transformations are indeed happening.

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Litha Ncokezi has been exhibiting regularly, including at the 2008 South African Handmade Collection, Gallagher Estate; 2008 Grahamstown National Arts Festival; 2007 - DTI One of a Kind Trade Show Midrand; 2007 - ECDC Master Crafters Exhibition at Grahamstown National Arts Festival; 2006 - Baobab Gallery Inaugural Exhibition; 2006 - Exhibition in the United States of America; 2006 - W.S.U. B. Tech Fine Art exhibition; 2006 - Absa L’Atelier Exhibition and Award (Ann Bryant Art Gallery); 2004-2005 Grahamstown National Arts Festival. In 2008 he achieved the TRU F.M. Youth Award - Education; and in 2006 he received the Vice Chancellor’s Award for B. Tech Fine Art (Cum laude); in 2006 he was nominated for an Eastern Cape Provincial Premier’s Award in the category of Sculpture; and in 2004 received the Vice Chancellor’s Award for N. Dip Fine Art (Cum laude); and between 2001 -2003 received the School of Applied Art Top Achiever’s Award. Has works in several private collections, and most recently four works were selected for the Eastern Cape Provincial Department of Sport, Recreation, Arts and Culture for the Head Office permanent collection.

John Steele began working with clay in the 1970’s at Rhodes, a small village in a mountainous region of the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Here, being without electricity, he worked as a studio potter for ten years on a kick wheel, reduction firing the utilityware with gravity fed old engine oil atomised using a blower powered by a lawnmower engine. In these early days both David Potter and Lindsay Scott were his mentors. In the early 1980’s the family moved to Mthatha where he took up the position of manager at the Ikhwezi Lokusa Pottery, this post having been vacated by Joe Farrager. Thereafter a move to East London took place in 1992, from which time he has been lecturing Ceramics and Art Theory variously at the Belgravia Art Center, and then at the Walter Sisulu University: Dept Fine Art since 1997. He has exhibited regularly since the 1970’s and continues to do so, a work entitled “Together by Chance” being currently on show at the Ann Bryant Gallery, East London.