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Sabatini Building, Floor 3

Belkis Ayón: Collographs



Sikán, 1991. © Estate de Belkis Ayón, Havana

Belkis Ayón (Havana, 1967–1999) was one of the most outstanding printmakers of the late twentieth century. Having studied at Havana's Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA) from 1986 to 1991, she came of age as an artist during Cuba's great economic, social, and ideological crisis, triggered by the collapse of socialism in Europe.

Ayón excelled as a master of collography, producing large-scale works — by piecing together multiple, individually printed sections — that were remarkable for their scenography and complex composition. Through these works, she laid out a universal discourse that stood against marginalization, frustration, fear, censorship, intolerance, violence, impotence, and lack of liberty.

Around ninety works have been gathered for this, the artist's first retrospective in Europe. Produced from 1986 to 1999, they represent a brief but intense career, tragically cut short when Ayón took her own life at the age of thirty-two.

The central theme in Ayón's work is Abakuá, a secret society originating in Calabar (in modern-day Nigeria) but taken to Cuba by African slaves in the early nineteenth century. The Abakuá brotherhood, exclusively male, remains active on the island today, having preserved an almost impregnable code of ethics and mystery. From the position of an atheist observer, Ayón studied the legend of Abakuá — which is passed on orally — and provided it with a startling iconography, interpreting the myth from her own perspective as a Black, Cuban, female, contemporary artist.

The legend upon which all Abakuá's initiation rites are based revolves around Sikán, princess of Efó, and her discovery of Tanze, a "sacred fish" or "supernatural being" sent by Abasí, the supreme God. Adoration of Tanze will bring peace to Calabar, a region plagued by bloody tribal battles, so Sikán takes the fish to

Nasakó, a seer and the community's principal religious figure. Nasakó forces Sikán to take a vow of silence, lest her discovery aggravate the wars, but she confesses her secret to Mokongo, her fiancée. Mokongo is from Efik, an enemy territory to the nation of Efó, and Sikán is duly sentenced to death for her betrayal. But with her dies Tanze and his characteristic roar. The sacred voice is never heard again, until a goat is chosen to replace Tanze and reproduce the sound of his roar. How Tanze's voice is summoned through drums remains the Abakuá's most sacred secret.

Ayón's first works concerned with Abakuá date from 1985. Most are color pieces achieved through academic art forms and techniques: lithography, woodcut, linoleum, and collography. With great economy of means, Ayón populates these geometric compositions with the characters and symbols she believes represent the essence of the myth: Nasakó, Mokongo, Tanze, and Princess Sikán, the only woman involved and, paradoxically, the focal figure in the folklore of a society that banished, condemned, and sacrificed her. By 1988, Ayón had begun to create large-scale collographs, piecing together up to nine individually printed sections. These works broke new



El señor del secreto (The master of the secret), 1988. © The Belkis Ayón Estate, Havana

ground in Cuba, both for their size and for their use of spot colors, which gave them a pop art aesthetic redolent of Cuban poster art and the graphic work of Umberto Peña and Rafael Zarza.

Above all, it was the singularity of her theme and the perspective from which she broached the subject that marked her out, heralding her as an artist prepared to probe myths and adapt them to her own time and circumstances. In *El señor del secreto* (The master of the secret, 1988), several female and male figures fight for possession of a fish that ends up in the hands of a man. Such a narrative departs from the Abakuá legend, as the linkage of power struggles and gender supremacy is more socioeconomic and political than it is religious. Here Ayón tackles issues of universal ethics and values, as she would throughout her career. Sikán appeared

in Ayón's work for the first time in 1987 and remained the main focus of her attention until 1991. "Sikán is the principle character, the mother of every Abakuá, the great sacrificed initiator," she would say. By delving deeper into Sikán's character, Ayón felt inspired to appropriate the myth, affording it due respect but opening it up to a new reading whereby the female figure exerts control. The Sikáns in these prints/portraits, and the titles Ayón gives them, allude to unjust sentences, false repentance, the need for salvation, and the yearning for a permanency that transcends death in the collective memory.

Ayón not only affords the princess prominence but portrays her in the image of herself, an indication of just how much the artist identified with her character; the works convey a sense of Ayón embodying a similarly complex existence to Sikán, a shared destiny. But Ayón absorbed



La cena (The supper), 1988 (matrix). © The Belkis Ayón Estate, Havana

La cena (The supper), 1988. © The Belkis Ayón Estate, Havana

an array of influences besides, and her work references other, non-African religions and cultures to which she felt a kinship.

Perhaps more than any other work, *La cena* (The supper, 1988) encapsulates three key moments in Ayón's trajectory as an artist. The first is her choosing Abakuá as her subject matter, a decision made in her student days, and then finding a language of mediation to connect it to her own ethical, aesthetic, and ideological context. The second is her decision to make collography her technical

tool, vastly expanding her possibilities of expression. Collography is a graphic technique that involves sticking various materials onto a backing (usually cardboard) in the manner of a collage, then covering it with ink and passing it through a printing press; the result is an almost infinite range of shapes and textures. The third moment is her forsaking color in favor of black and white, and their never-ending gradients of gray, an especially apt means of portraying the existential dramas of her characters, in whom we see Ayón's own reflection.



The monumental nature of *La cena* had no precedent in Cuban printmaking and marked a turning point in Ayón's career. That she used sections no larger than one hundred by seventy centimeters, which she then tiled to form larger pieces, has been attributed to the scarcity of art materials in Cuba in the 1990s. But it was more a matter of Ayón choosing to work in dimensions that allowed for precise control of the inks and printing press. The fragile nature of collographic molds and Ayón's perfectionist nature were the real reasons for her elaborate assemblies.

Ayón reached her creative maturity from 1991 to 1998, when she produced large-scale collographs whose content articulated universal values but also reflected — in elliptical fashion — the existential crisis Cuban society was experiencing at the time. Her interest in moving beyond the two-dimensionality of traditional printmaking led her to employ an ever-increasing number of sections in her patchwork assemblies, resulting in scenes and characters that were life-size. The extra scale suggested a new interaction between the spectator and the exhibition space, for these “print installations” were set up in such a way that the action appeared to leap out at the viewer. The effect was enhanced by the works’ irregular shapes, with borders suggesting certain architectural styles (Byzantine domes; medieval Christian crypts), and the hanging itself, with works mounted on sloping or angled surfaces, adapting to the surrounding architecture or creating the allusion of a new one. All this gave the work a depth and dynamism that was unprecedented in Cuban printmaking.

Toward the end of the 1990s — and also her life — Ayón expanded her repertoire, moving away from Abakuá to produce self-referential



My vernicle o tu amor me condena (My vernicle or your love condemns me), 1998 (matrix)
© The Belkis Ayón Estate, Havana

images linked to personal experience. Tattered love affairs, typical of Latin American pop songs, provide the narrative threads to works such as *My vernicle* (a reference to the cloth held out by Veronica, a Biblical figure who followed as Jesus carried the cross), which Ayón matched to lines taken from *vallenatos* (Colombian pop songs) referencing various emotions. As with Sikán's fate in the Abakuán legend, the titles of these pieces clearly parallel the conflicts and suffering Ayón faced in life: betrayal, agony, solitude, loss of affection, deep fear, despair, harassment, and the anxious search for a way out.

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