

BELKIS AYÓN

Collographs



Exhibition view **Belkis Ayón. *Collographs*** Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía November, 2021. Photographic Archive of Museo Reina Sofía

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| LOCATION: | Museo Reina Sofía (Madrid). Sabatini Building, Floor 3 |
| ORGANIZATION: | Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in collaboration with the Belkis Ayón Estate |
| CURATORSHIP: | Cristina Vives |
| COORDINATION: | María del Castillo Cabeza |

The first retrospective in Europe devoted to Cuban artist Belkis Ayón (Havana, 1967–1999) includes a selection of around **80 artworks produced between 1986 and 1999**, including **around 50 collographs**, that delve deep into her short but prolific career. **Collography is an unusual printmaking technique** based on matrixes built as collages and developed by Ayón to create a **unique artistic language rich in nuances and textures** that are hard to obtain through any other medium.

The show shines a light on the artist's work by starting with **her first visual investigations around the Afro-Cuban secret society Abakuá**, imagery that would accompany her from the time she submitted her thesis at the San Alejandro National Academy of Fine Arts in 1988, to her **large-scale pieces with a pronounced set design quality**, through which a complex visual and universal world is conveyed, syncretizing mythology and Abakuá ritual with the main iconographic elements of the Catholic religion. In between, the show analyses her shift to black-and-white prints in the 1990s as a more apt medium for expressing the existential turmoil that imbues her oeuvre, addressing pressing issues of the times: **censorship, violence, intolerance, exclusion, inequalities, control mechanisms and power structures**. Ayón came of age as an artist during a profound economic and ideological crisis in Cuba triggered by the fall of the Iron Curtain and the collapse of socialism in Europe.

The Abakuá Secret Society

Most of Ayón's oeuvre focuses on a reinterpretation of the mythical Abakuá iconography, an Afro-Cuban secret society of mutual aid, whose symbolic universe she appropriates to re-signify it as if it was a postmodern quotation. Originated in the Calabar region of today's Nigeria, and brought to Cuba by African slaves in the early 19th century, this brotherhood was created by and for men, and stigmatized and segregated women.

Across her career, the ritual and beliefs of the hermetic, men-only brotherhood Abakuá served as inspiration to create a distinctive language expressing ethical, aesthetic and universally ideological issues. The artist studied all available bibliographic and testimonial sources, but she did so from her condition as an atheist spectator. He endowed the Abakuá legend - basically orally transmitted - with an overwhelming iconography and interpreted the myth from his perspective as a contemporary, black and Cuban artist. The representation of the goddess Sikán, sacrificed by the men of her community and considered an alter ego by the artist, transcends an ethno-identity or gender-based approach to embark on a complex world of relations, emotions and conflicts, for instance regret, salvation, fear and the need to transcend collective memory.



BELKIS AYÓN
Sikán, 1991
Collograph on paper
200 x 137 cm
Belkis Ayón Estate, La Habana, Cuba

Belkis Ayón's earliest works on the Abakuá theme date from 1985, when the artist was still studying engraving in her third year at the Academy of San Alejandro in Havana. Most of her works from this period are in color and follow techniques and formats that respond to academic demands – lithography, woodcut, linocut and collography. These are geometric compositions that visually translate the artist's readings on the Abakuá with great economy of means.

The first collographs

In 1988, for the first time, Ayón made large format collographs by assembling up to nine printed sections and presented them in the exhibition *Propuesta a los veinte años* [Proposal at the age of twenty], held at a gallery in Havana. In this way, she created the matrices with the collagraph technique (from the Greek colla, rubber, and graphein, draw, write), an additive method that consists of affixing a wide variety of materials like a collage to a plate, generally of cardboard, which is then inked and pressed to produce an almost infinite range of forms and textures. The pieces were a great novelty in Cuba owing to their large size and the use of color planes, close to the Pop aesthetic of Cuban poster art and the graphic work produced in the 1960s and 1970s. Above all, however, the unusual content and the way it was focused already announced an artist who transgressed myths to adapt them to her time and circumstances.



BELKIS AYÓN
***The Supper*, 1991**
Collograph on paper
140 x 299 cm
Belkis Ayón Estate, La Habana, Cuba

The Supper (1988-1991) is the most eloquent summary of three key moments in Ayón's artistic career. The first was her choice of the Abakuá theme while still a student, and the consequent articulation of a language of mediation to connect with her own context in ethical, aesthetic, and ideological terms. The second stemmed from her choice of the collography as a technical tool that broadened her expressive possibilities. The third has to do with her abandonment of color in favor of black and white with its almost infinite gradations of gray, more suitable for transmitting the existential drama of her characters, in whose reflection her own drama is to be glimpsed. *The Supper* amplifies the reading that fuses the Abakuá myth and its protagonists with other religions

and symbolic systems, such as early Christianity and its institutional Catholic version, which unquestionably share codes of representation.

The Nlloro, the Abakuá word for weeping, is the funeral rite held after the burial of the *ekobio* (religious brother). The artist's alteration of the order of the Abakuá ritual consists of placing the corpse in the center of the funeral in an act identical to the Catholic ritual. **Nlloro** (1991) is a complex work in both its composition and its symbolism. Appearing on the right is one of the fundamental characters, the spirit (*íreme*) Anamangüí, a black figure covered with *anaforuanas* (intricate graphics symbols) who stands before the corpse. This character is responsible for guiding the dead man's spirit on his ascent to heaven. On the far left is Mpegó, the priest of the symbols, who carries a drum and is in charge of drawing the *anaforuanas* in every ceremony. The figures in leopard skins may refer to the grief felt by the whole Abakuá community at the loss of their brother. The Nlloro reaches its culmination when it is ascertained that the dead man's soul has departed forever.

The collographic matrix of Nlloro, exhibited here for the first time outside Cuba, is technically more complex than the previous matrices for multiple-section works made in 1988, and indicates that 1991 was a crucial year in the artist's career.



BELKIS AYÓN
The Consecration I, 1991
Collograph on paper
224 x 299,5 cm
Belkis Ayón Estate, La Habana, Cuba

For the Abakuá, consecration ceremonies symbolize a legitimization of power that guarantees its perpetuity. Other religions also hold ceremonies of this type. In 1991, Belkis Ayón composed ***La consagración I, II y III*** [The Consecration I, II and III], a triptych representing the foundational levels of the Abakuá Secret Society in Cuba: the birth/initiation of candidates for membership (*Ndísime*); the oath of the hierarchs or spiritual leaders (*Plazas*); and the emergence of a new group (*Potencia*), the minimum organizational unit of the Society. The triptych interprets and stages the ritual, showing the main

characters with their attributes and making clear both the scale of power and the roles of the different members of the Society in organizational and structural terms. This pyramidal power structure, supported by a broad base of 'simple' members organized in interlinked territorial units that are nevertheless directed from above by select figures, is a replica on a smaller scale of the stratification of political power in Cuba since 1959, well known to the artist and still in force today.

The 1990s

1993 was one of the most productive and intense years in Ayón's career. It was then that the artist transcended the local connotations of the Abakuá religion and the 'Afro-Cuban legacy' to approach a more universal spirituality. It was also the moment when Belkis definitively took her place among the group of Cuban artists who were emerging from the profound crisis of the 'Special Period'.

In November 1995, Belkis showed a set of works entitled ***Sostenme en el dolor*** [Support Me, Hold Me in Pain], mostly produced in 1993, at the church of St. Barbara in the German town of Breinig. The artist replaced the traditional Catholic scenes of the stations of the cross in the nave of the church with fourteen of her own works on Abakuá themes. To each piece, she added a second title referring to a biblical passage, giving the original African myth a new reading. The set was entitled Via Crucis, according to an annotation by the artist found on the back of one of the exhibition posters. Belkis thus created a new narrative, replacing the biblical Christ with her alter ego Sikán.

Belkis reached her artistic maturity between 1991 and 1998 with large format collographs full of universal values that also elliptically reflect the existential crisis of Cuban society in the 1990s. Her interest in shattering the two-dimensionality of the traditional engraving led her increasingly to use assemblages in multiple sections, leading to life-size scenes and figures that favored interaction with the space and the viewer. These 'installational' engravings function as a mise-en-scène for an action that largely invades the viewer's space. This derives partly from irregular formats and the use of architecture (Byzantine-style vaults or constructions that recall mediaeval crypts), but also from the installation of the works themselves on inclined planes or at angles adapted to the architecture, or intended to create the illusion of a new one. The dynamism and depth acquired by these pieces has no precedents in Cuban engraving. At the end of the 1990s – also the end of her life – Belkis Ayón bestowed an almost epic dimension on the figures of the Abakuá rite. Scenes in an apocalyptic tone narrate a sort of human epic involving sacrifice, betrayal, disobedience, the reincarnation of the spirit, the longing for the lost one, and the ascent to other spheres.



BELKIS AYÓN
Untitled (Sikán with Goat), 1993
Collograph on paper
88,5 x 70 cm
Belkis Ayón Estate, La Habana, Cuba

Between 1997 and 1999, Belkis Ayón worked intensely on an attempt to renew the formal and thematic issues addressed by her work. Under the title ***Desasosiego/Restlessness*** (Couturier Gallery, Los Angeles, March 1998), her last solo exhibition brought together a series of collographs in the form of tondos, where she evaded her usual Abakuá repertoire to make way for self-referential images associated with personal experiences.

The heartrending love stories typical of Latin American popular song provide a backdrop to pieces like the series ***My Vernicle*** (a reference to the veil of Veronica, the biblical character encountered by Christ on the road to Calvary), which the artist nuanced with titles taken from vallenatos (Colombian popular songs) in reference to emotions like betrayal, agony, solitude, disaffection, deep fears, or anguish.

The printed space of the pieces was reduced to a circle no larger than 80 cm in diameter, mostly occupied by a single female face. There we can identify the artist experiencing the restlessness of Sikán in her own flesh. The artist faced in those years, as Sikán did in the legend, the same conflicts and sufferings now suggested by the titles of her works: betrayal, agony, loneliness, loss of affection, deep fears, restlessness, harassment, and the anguish to find an exit.

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