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BELKIS AYÓN: *NKAME*

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The first emotion that hits upon entering *NKAME* is intrigue. Belkis Ayón died. She was 32. She killed herself. Set neatly next to the curator’s statement are the words, “Do not recall in your sleep any of your siblings who cry over your absence.” What does one make of this brief yet chilling message, inscribed on the graves of a Cuban secret society, the Abakuá? Ayón, who died in 1999, made the Abakuá the sole focus of her artistic endeavors. However, one need not be familiar with the obscure history of the Abakuá to appreciate the depth of energy and technical finesse in Ayón’s body of work. The title of the exhibition, *NKAME*, comes from “a word meaning praise and salutation in the Abakuá language.”¹ The warmth of the title inverts the chilling tone of the grave stone epithet; it is both a praising of Ayón’s work and mourning of her departure.



Installation image of *NKAME: A Retrospective of Cuban Printmaker Belkis Ayón*. Photo by Adam Reich. Courtesy of El Museo del Barrio.

The exhibition, a traveling show which debuted at the Fowler Museum in Los Angeles, details Ayón's growth and relentless dedication to bringing the Abakuá into the spotlight. Curated by Cristina Vives, an art critic and independent curator based in Havana, *NKAME* showcases more than forty prints from Ayón's early days as a student to the last works she produced. As her skill and confidence in her craft grew, Ayón's work became larger, and the color that dominated her student work was rejected in favor of sheer black and white compositions.

Ayón's prints are marvels. Split into numerous different canvases and then put together, her strongest works rely on a riveting use of black and white. Shadowy and mouthless black figures—an ode to the secrecy of the Abakuá—are a recurrent theme. Not only is Ayón's choice of subject obscure, her manner of work reflects the same air of peculiarity. Collography, Ayón's chosen style of printmaking, is one in which the artist has to collage the materials onto a cardboard matrix and then apply it to paper through a press. This allows her to remain in control of every aspect of the work, as the texture and color can all be executed slowly and methodically prior to her having to put it through a press.

Belkis Ayón, *Mi alma y yo te queremos (My soul and I love you)*, collograph. 1993

In *Sálvanos Abasi (Abasi Save Us)* (1989) Ayón depicts a ghostly white figure without mouth or nostrils baring fish on a necklace, holding a cross, and embracing a dead lamb. Her religious imagery is profound, and because Abakuá is a society based on both Christian and Nigerian beliefs, there is a loose familiarity in Ayón's works that makes the enigmatic quality of the secret society that much more pronounced. The ghostly white figure in *Sálvanos Abasi* is Sikán, an African woman who is the counterpart to Christianity's Eve. The representation of the goat and the cross—as seen in early Middle Ages portrayals of Christianity—is a representation of the deity *Abasí*. The fish necklace is meant to evoke *Tanzé*, a sacred fish to those in the *Abakua*. This is Ayón's first depiction of Sikán, and it evokes both the figure's power as well as her unattainable distance, which, in an exhibition of work by an artist whose death is still shrouded in mystery, has the effect of linking the artist to the goddess. Ayón's use of Sikán keeps the obscure deity present.

Ayón's reliance on black and white has a sobering effect, and the repetition of so many black-and-white prints—despite the variance of scale—is compelling. Although none of the figures have mouths, their eyes vary in size and color; some have solid black pupils, others are entirely white. This variation is intensified in a work from 1993, *Mi alma y yo te queremos (My soul and I love you)*. A big, featureless, shadow-esque figure with blank white eyes looms over what looks like a hilltop where a smaller figure, evidently a man, crouches down. Both the looming figure and the small man wear skullcaps, which are not too dissimilar from the hilltop—suggesting perhaps an interconnectivity between figures and the land. The blank eyes of the shadow-esque figure are watchful; its eyes are cast down upon the smaller figure whose eyes are as dark as his body, as if they were in fact shut. The work raises questions about what is seen and unseen, and by extension, what is revealed and what remains cloaked in mystery.

NKAME shines brilliantly due to the fact that Belkis Ayón's prints remain engrossing and powerfully enigmatic throughout the show. Her world—a secret society of which she was not allowed to be a part of—remains equally removed for the viewer. It is as if she has opened a passage through which we can gaze, but like Ayón herself, can never enter.

Notes

1. "NKAME Belkis Ayón." El Museo. <http://www.elmuseo.org/nkame-belkis-ayon/>.

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