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Belkis Ayón: Mythical Figures

Belkis Ayón gets her first museum retrospective in Los Angeles.

Cuban artist and printmaker Belkis Ayón's wanted her images to envelop the viewer. Says Cristina Vives, the guest curator of the exhibition "**Nkame: A Retrospective of Cuban Printmaker Belkis Ayón,**" which is currently at the [Fowler Museum at UCLA](#) (through February 12), "Belkis wanted the viewer to feel equal in front of her characters and prints, as if he or she might be able to go into the scene she was representing." It was necessary, then, for Ayón to create large, human-scale prints—a feat perhaps more challenging than it sounds. "The traditional engraving techniques used small paper sizes, and that was a problem for her," says Vives, "She wanted to go beyond tradition and push the technique forward." To create one large image, Ayón used multiple parts—sometimes up to 18 sheets joined together. As a result, her prints are imposing and dramatic. They have no equal in contemporary Cuban printmaking.

But Ayón's chosen scale isn't simply for innovation or vanity's sake. As we learn from Homeric epic and major religious texts, when a mythology is being divulged, there is no such thing as too large a scale. Ayón's work takes the foundation myth of the Afro-Cuban fraternal society Abakuá as its major theme. Her prints depict initiations and rituals taken purely from Abakuá or mixed with Christian ceremonies and symbolism. The society, which does not allow female members, was a fascination for the artist, though not something she herself could be a part of. As with other societies, such as Freemasonry, the group's strength is derived from members' loyalty to its secrets. In Abakuá it is said, "Friendship is one thing, and the Abakuá another." While Ayón's work hopes to be inclusive, her subject matter is determined to be the opposite.

Ayón rarely used color, instead opting for black and white. Her tonal grays, rich blacks, and stark pops of white somehow seem just as expressive, if not more so, than color, not unlike the clarity of vision one can experience after one's eyes adjust to the darkness. The artist's signature process was collography, a printing technique in which materials of various textures are collaged onto a cardboard matrix which is then inked and printed from, either with a press or by hand. The method produced incredibly intricate and evocative textural elements in Ayón's work; just one print can reproduce the effects of reptile skin, fish scales, tile, feathers, and fauna. Ayón used chalk, varnish, acrylic, sandpaper, abrasives, and various types of paper to create these patterns; knives and scissors to create lines and cuts; and glue to fix them to the cardboard. Her methods were incredibly labor-intensive, and the complexity and scale of her work bears a sacramental quality akin to the frescoes of the Italian Renaissance.

Ayón was born in Havana in 1967. She studied at the San Alejandro Academy of Fine Arts, finished her education at the Higher Institute of Art/Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA) in 1991,



Belkis Ayón, Nlloro (Weeping), 1991, collograph

Featured Images: *(Click to Enlarge)*



and within two years was teaching engraving at both institutions. In 1993, she exhibited at the 16th Venice Biennale and won the international prize at the International Graphics Biennale in Maastricht, Holland. Her work has shown around the world—notably in Los Angeles, Germany, South Korea, and her native Havana—and is in the permanent collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In 1999, at the age of 32, Ayón committed suicide. She left behind an incredibly ambitious body of work and a string of accomplishments most young artists only wish to achieve.

Vives was instrumental in organizing the first real retrospective of Ayón's work, which was held at St. Francis of Assisi Convent (a converted art space) in Old Havana in 2009—a decade after her death. However, the show at the Fowler Museum is Ayón's first true museum retrospective. Vives and Ayón's estate were keen on the idea of moving the show to Los Angeles. "Belkis frequently exhibited in Los Angeles during her life and she has a lot of collectors there," says Vives. "Her last show was at Couturier Gallery on La Brea, and so it is very symbolic to have a show in L.A." "Nkame" adds to the Fowler's history with exhibitions dealing with the religions and mythologies associated with the African Diaspora, such as "Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou" (1995) and "Transcultural Pilgrim: Three Decades of Work by José Bedía" (2011). "Nkame," which translates in the language of Abakuá to "greeting" or "praise," features 43 prints that range in date from 1984 to the year of the artist's death. The show is as much a tribute to her life and output as it is an unprecedented viewing experience for American museum-goers.

[Abakuá](#) began as a fraternal association in the Cross River region of southeastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon. It established itself in Haiti and the western port cities of Cuba in the 19th century, when slaves were brought from Africa. Members of the society, *Ñáñigos* or *diablitos* as they are sometimes called, are known in Cuba for dressing in ceremonial garb and dancing through the streets during the Carnival on the Day of the Three Kings. One of the myths of Abakuá is that *Ñáñigos* can transform into leopards in order to stalk their rivals like prey. In *Veneración* (Veneration), an early lithograph (circa 1986) and a rare color print by Ayón, four figures of a group of seven are depicted in leopard skins. In many of Ayón's other prints, spotted-looking textures cover human figures, suggesting leopard skin.

In the society's founding myth, *Sikán*, a princess, is the first to hear the mystical voice of Abakuá from a fish she accidentally catches. Fish bones and scales are featured prominently in Ayón's prints. *Sikán* is instructed never to reveal her sacred knowledge, which woman were not permitted to have. She later confides in her fiancé and is therefore condemned to death. In Ayón's work, however, *Sikán* remains alive. In *La cena* (1991), for instance, the work that opens the exhibition, *Sikán*, depicted in stark white with a black serpent around her neck, sits in the center of an Abakuá initiation dinner, taking the place of Christ in *The Last Supper*. *Sikán*, who is represented frequently in the artist's work, is depicted with a blank face, save for a pair of wide-open eyes. The princess was a symbol for Ayón herself, who wrote, "I see myself as *Sikán*, in a certain way an observer, an intermediary and a revealer... *Sikán* is a transgressor, and as such I see her, and I see myself."

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