



TORRES

& TUMBAS

TOWERS & TOMBS

Belkis Ayón

Havana

(1967 - 9 . 11 . 1999)

Twin Towers

New York

(1974 - 9 . 11 . 2001)

José A. Figueroa (Cuba)

Janis Lewin (USA)

A tribute to Katia Ayón (Havana, 1964-2019)

A project by the Estudio Figueroa-Vives,
the Embassy of Norway in Cuba and the Belkis Ayón Estate



Untitled, 1999. Offset lithograph, 2080 x 1100 mm. Issue 1/1. Col. Belkis Ayón Estate (Unfinished work made at the Brandywine Workshop, Philadelphia. It was supposed to be made up by 14 pieces, but the artist could finish only 6.)

ANOTHER APPROACH TO BELKIS AYÓN

Thus described Belkis Ayón the intentions of her work in a manuscript text from 1993, at the beginning of her career, interrupted early by suicide on September 11, 1999, at the age of 32.

Torres y tumbas is an exhibition commemorating the 20th anniversary of her death, but also a new excuse for further delving into her work, this time trying to explore a scarcely known aspect: the process that mediates between the written or drawn idea to the plate and the printing.

It will surprise the viewer to learn the way in which some of her original ideas embodied in small sheets or pieces of paper (her sketches) – that she never signed or exhibited and which deny her own words of not considering herself a draftsman – intertwine and change with the collagraphic plates that derived from them. These plates, now exhibited for the first time, add an impressive amount of information (volumes, textures and qualities) that, although later transferred to the printed paper, remain on the plate almost with greater force, as if the plate itself were the final sculpted object. It was these plates that, in turn, led the artist to force the traditional dimensions of engraving in her day and transform many of her works into tridimensional and human scale assemblages. The skill in the execution of her plates emulates with the already recognized mastery of her prints, and on occasions excels it.

Also exhibited are several prints that make up the last of her series – created between 1997 and 1998 –, which the artist put together in her last solo show entitled *Desasosiego* (Restlessness) (Couturier Gallery, Los Angeles, March-April, 1998). These works, of reduced printed areas and unusual round form for Belkis' standards are shown for the first time together with the plates that originated them, recreating a dialogue that recalls the very essence of the engraving technique, i.e., the work in the workshop, when the always magic instant of the transit from negative to positive takes place on the image.

Another section of *Torres y tumbas* brings together, also for the first time in Cuba, the works exhibited by the artist in November, 1995 under the title *Sosténme en el dolor* (*Unterstütze mich, halte mich hoch, im Schmerz*) (Support Me, Hold Me in Pain) in the church of Saint Barbara, in the German city of Breining. On that occasion Belkis had the opportunity to intervene the temple's central nave and make her scenes based on the Abakuá legend coexist with the sacred Catholic spaces. She also gave each of her pieces a second title allusive to biblical passages, as a second identity for the African myth. She called it *Via Crucis* (Stations of the Cross), as written by her on the exhibition poster, thus summarizing the itinerary to Calvary of her alter ego, princess Sikán of the Abakuá legend.

A 2017 audiovisual of Swiss curator Inés Anselmi based on an interview with the artist in 1999 shows a Belkis openly declaring her condition of postmodern artist who makes use of narrative resources first read in Lydia Cabrera's book *El monte* (1954) as useful tools for her universal, atheist discourse, more linked to the social and political context of her day than to try to perpetuate certain religious beliefs. Another audiovisual reconstructs Ayón's professional life using photographs that transform her in the eyes of the viewer from the moment of her graduation from San Alejandro Academy in Havana in 1986 to August, 1999, date of her last known photo. A career is thus pictured that resumes the international scope of her work and the connection with the most outstanding artists of her generation.

For 30 years the Estudio Figueroa-Vives has been linked to the life and work of Belkis Ayón: from the initial contacts in 1989, when the artist was emerging as an unusual figure that was breaking the moulds of Cuban graphics, to *Nkame*, the retrospective of her work curated by Cristina Vives that has been traveling since 2016 to museums of the United States and is recognized by the international critique as one of the most noteworthy public exhibitions in 2016-2017 in the United States.

The present tribute to the life of Belkis commits the Estudio Figueroa-Vives to continue studying and going beyond the classification patterns employed to analyze the artist's work at the beginning of her career from technical, religious or anthropological points of view.

NEW YORK, SEPTEMBER 11, TWO PERSPECTIVES: JOSÉ A. FIGUEROA AND JANIS LEWIN

On September 10, 2001, the New York photographer Janis Lewin and the Cuban photographer José A. Figueroa, together with other colleagues, attended the opening at the Grey Art Gallery of the University of New York (NYU) of the exhibition *Shifting Tides. Cuban Photography after the Revolution*, curated by Tim Wride, curator of photography at Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) with the collaboration of the Estudio Figueroa-Vives in Havana. The following morning, the Twin Towers in Manhattan and the Pentagon building in Virginia were attacked by suicidal aircraft in one of the most sophisticated terrorist plans ever seen by the contemporary world. Life in the planet radically changed since that morning and up to this day.

Figueroa and Janis, together but from very different perspectives given their different degrees of commitment with the events and their very different origin, photographed New York "under attack", walking the same streets and exchanging fears and reflections. Both needed one another, like all the people in that city in those days. The outcome of their glances was two photographic series still unseen entirely, of which the exhibition *Torres y tumbas* only shows the point of the iceberg.

Figueroa had experienced similar sensations of rupture, violence and fear before, when he was war correspondent in Angola in the early 1980s, or when he witnessed the actual fall of the Berlin wall and the end of the GDR in June, 1990. In both circumstances his photographs pointed to the spaces as protagonists. In Angola it was the empty interiors of the refuges south of the country, the constructions with tracks of the rifles, and a few Cuban soldiers looking at the camera, astonished and desolated. In Berlin it was the wall in its gradual process of disintegration: erect and apparently solid first, then pillaged with hammer blows by the



© José A. Figueroa

people from Berlin, later raised in pieces from its concrete foundations and destroyed, piece by piece. In New York, between the 11th and the 15th of September, 2001, Figueroa photographed the same things: emblematic avenues, streets, and corners of the city (Times Square among them); train and subway stations that connect Manhattan with almost the entire country; tunnels and bridges where traffic never ceases: everything resumed in an empty, fearful city. New York was always a state of mind for Figueroa, and that unthinkable void was the best symptom of the dimension of the tragedy.

Lewin, in turn, had lived in New York since 1985, and was therefore used to its environment and did not notice the spaces but the people going through the drama of 9/11. She lived, and still does, in Queens, city of immigrants and workers, she herself a descendant of immigrants. Which made the almost 3,000 death victims of the Twin Towers, mostly service workers in



© Janis Lewin

that “vertical city” close members of a single community: neither white nor black nor Spanish nor religious or atheist nor divided, but united by the same measure of humanity. The photographs of the victims printed on flyers that covered the city walls, the photos of the relatives of the “missing” ones, of the rescue firefighters, of the supportive passers-by, of the ordinary men of the New York of 9/11: those were the protagonists of Lewin’s photos, and her images hold no space for the void.

...A white, unknown woman was passing by and looked at Mrs. Goody, falling down, desperate. She hugged her, in silence. That day I learned that Harry Goody III was 50 years old and worked in Tower 2 of the World Trade Center. His wife and relatives hoped that someone might have seen him, but no; his name is on the Memorial, marked S-48...

Janis Lewin,
August, 2019

...Although you may think it’s a lie, I’m not scared. This is terrible, but we are used to live awaiting war...

José A. Figueroa,
September 11, 2001,
via telephone
from New York

Torres y tumbas (Towers and Tombs) proposes an unwonted parallel between historical moments, lives and aesthetics, apparently isolated. On one side are the liberation messages contained in the works of Belkis Ayón, and on the other, the images from 9/11 by Figueroa and Janis Lewin, which mark the beginning of a higher stage of violence, fears, lacerations and segregations triggered by the fall of towers that seemed eternal.

Belkis lived 32 years; the Twin Towers only 27. They were very young.

@*Torres y tumbas* is a project by the Estudio Figueroa-Vives, the Embassy of Norway and the Belkis Ayón Estate on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of Belkis Ayón's decease and the attack to the Twin Towers of New York.

September 11-November, 2019.

Exhibition in tribute to Katia Ayón Manso (Havana 1964-2019)

Curatorship, texts, museography: @Estudio Figueroa-Vives

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