

Nkame in New York: Belkis Ayón at El Museo del Barrio

The artist's first US museum retrospective travels East

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Belkis Ayón, *La cena* (The Supper), 1991
Courtesy El Museo del Barrio

*Last fall, Nkame: A Retrospective of Cuban Printmaker Belkis Ayón made its **US debut at the Fowler Museum at UCLA**—the artist's first museum exhibition outside Cuba. Now, it's arrived in New York. Here's a look at the **show at El Museo del Barrio**, with excerpts from the exhibition essay by curator Cristina Vives. (And read our interview with Vives about the Fowler show [here](#).)*



A view of the opening gallery at El Museo del Barrio
 Courtesy Yadira Leyva Ayón

The first work by Belkis Ayón that I ever saw was the color version of *La cena* (The Supper, 1988).



A color version of *La cena* (The Supper) by Belkis Ayón
 Photo: Cuban Art News

It was exhibited at a small gallery in Havana, and although the artist was only twenty at the time, I immediately realized that *La cena* marked a turning point in Cuban printmaking.



Two versions of *La cena* hang side by side in the gallery.

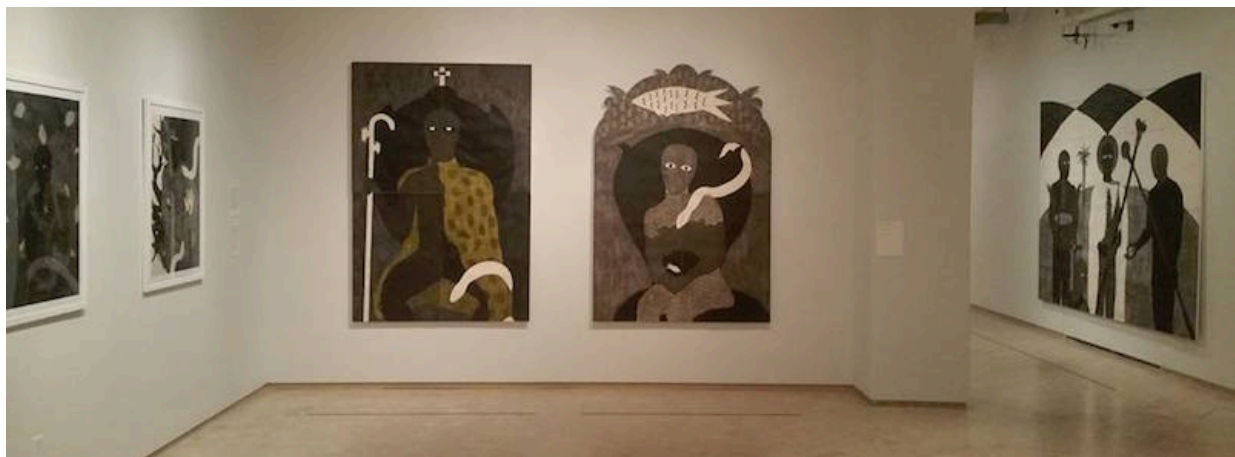
Photo: Cuban Art News

Years later, I would reflect that there were three defining moments in Belkis's career. The first occurred in 1986, when, while still an art student, she decided that the Abakuá fraternal society (its origin myth, symbolism, and manifestations) would constitute the language of her aesthetics and ideology.

Her decision that the printing technique known as collography was the tool best suited to her purposes was the second. The third arrived, when after experimenting with color, she decided that white, black, and the near infinite tones of gray would be the best way to translate the existential drama of her Abakuá subject matter, as well as of her country and herself reflected through it.

La cena is the work that perhaps best epitomizes these three moments.

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A view of the exhibition at El Museo

Courtesy Yadira Leyva Ayón

In the more than ten years of our friendship and professional collaboration, Belkis and I spoke about nearly everything, but it was not until late 1997, when I curated her last solo exhibition in the United States, *Desasosiego/Restlessness*, that we discussed her own religious beliefs.

She declared herself a complete atheist, as I had surmised. Her aim had always been to use the Abakuá myth as a means toward an end and not to embrace it or to assume the role of interpreter of an ancestral myth.



From left, Belkis Ayón, *Consagración II* and *Consagración I*, both 1991
Courtesy Yadira Leyva Ayón

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Few gallerists, critics, curators, or artists looked closely enough to see that her work manifested the same postmodernist subversion that other young Cuban artists pursued at the time.



A view of the exhibition at El Museo
Courtesy Yadira Leyva Ayón



A detail of Belkis Ayón, *Pa que me quieras por siempre* (To make you love me forever), 1991, demonstrating the range of effects Ayón created in her prints

Photo: Cuban Art News

Very few understood that Belkis was using new and subtle communication strategies, quotations, and appropriations to speak about the acute social conflicts affecting Cuba in the 1990s.



From left, Belkis Ayón, *Nlloro*, 1991, and *Sin título (Figura blanca arrodillada en el centro)* (Untitled: Figure in white, kneeling in center), 1995

Courtesy Yadira Leyva Ayón

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Belkis Ayón is now acknowledged for her merits as a teacher and promoter of young artists, as a curator of avant-garde engraving exhibitions, as a bridge of understanding between generations, and as a leader.



Belkis Ayón, *Resurrección* (Resurrection), 1998
Photo: Cuban Art News

She altruistically accepted these roles. . . . She did everything she could to achieve and to have us come closer to a level of social performance that was ultimately possible.

Nkame: A Retrospective of Cuban Printmaker Belkis Ayón runs through November 5, 2017, at *El Museo del Barrio*, New York. For shots of the opening, see the [photo album](#) on the Cuban Art News Facebook page.

— Cuban Art News