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From Cuba, a Stolen Myth



From left, “Anoranza” (“Longing”), from 1998, and “Nlloro” (“Weeping”), from 1991, by the Cuban printmaker Belkis Ayón, at El Museo del Barrio.

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By **HOLLAND COTTER**

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Late last week, the Trump administration announced that it would be re-abnormalizing the relationship between the United States and Cuba. A few days earlier, [El Museo del Barrio](#) in Manhattan opened “NKame: A Retrospective of Cuban Printmaker Belkis Ayón,” reminding us exactly how much we have to gain from a free exchange of cultural energy with our island neighbor.

Ayón was born in Havana in 1967 and died there, by her own hand, in 1999. As baffling and crushing as her end was, her life and career had been warm with forward motion. She began studying art at 12, went on to the renowned [Instituto Superior de Arte](#), and joined its faculty after graduation. She began exhibiting in Cuba, and word went out. Invitations for exhibitions and

residencies took her to Europe, Japan and North America.



“La Cena” (“The Supper”), from 1991, which depicts a version of the Christian “Last Supper,” replaces the Jesus figure with the princess Sikán.

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In 1993 she was invited to participate in the Venice Biennale. In Cuba, this was during the so-called Special Period, when a post-Soviet economic crisis led to drastic food and fuel shortages and transportation breakdowns. Life was a scramble. She had to bike 20 miles to the airport to make the flight to Venice, her father biking behind her with the work she would show there. Fortunately, it was readily portable work, even though it was monumental in concept and scale. She had settled on printmaking early as a medium, one that had had a long and brilliant history in Cuba, but was out of fashion by the 1980s, when she picked it up. And she chose to specialize in one of its more esoteric and labor-intensive forms: collography, a method of engraving that involved applying materials to a printing plate rather than digging into its surface.

In Ayón’s hands, the process became one of staggering virtuosity. She composed images from hundreds of pieces of soft paper, sandpaper, even vegetable peelings, fitting them all together on a cardboard sheet, like elements of a puzzle, then inking the sheet and running it through a hand-cranked printer. (You can see her doing this in a video in the show.) The results were notable for their complex physical textures, suggesting embossing, embroidery and raised painting, though what’s most striking on a first encounter is the work’s scale.



A study for “La Cena” (1991), in bright colors. The final version is in black, white and tones of gray.

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Some of her pieces are almost as big as murals, composed from as many as 18 separate prints, joined edge to edge to form panoramic narratives, sometimes with near-life-size figures. Their recurrent subject is fairly specific. Most of the narratives are derived from the Afro-Cuban religion called [Abakuá](#), which came to the island in the 18th century with slaves arriving from what is now Nigeria and Cameroon. Their religion struck deep roots and is still practiced there. (“NKame” means “greeting” or “praise” in the Abakuá language.)

In some ways, her choice of it as a theme was odd. Abakuá is a secret society restricted to male initiates, with a foundational story based on an act of female betrayal. In the very simplest terms, a woman named Sikán, a princess, while filling a water jug in the river, accidentally caught a miraculous fish that embodied the voice of an ancestor and guaranteed power to whoever heard it. She took the fish to her father, who swore her to silence, but she later passed the information to a leader of another community, for which she was condemned by her people to die.

Why Ayón focused on Abakuá isn’t clear. She wasn’t personally religious. (She referred to herself, when asked, as an atheist.) Nor did she seem to have any particular investment in Cubanidad, or Cuban identity, as an aesthetic phenomenon. In terms of audience reception, the subject, predictably, came with as many disadvantages as rewards. The Cuban government was suspicious of religious art of any kind. Outside Cuba, her work’s perceived exoticism drew fascinated attention, but was also automatically slotted into a “Latin American” category that limited its reach.



Belkis Ayón in a video at El Museo del Barrio.

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My guess is that along with appealing to her curiosity about culture, Abakuá provided Ayón with an opportunity for invention. The religion has a strong oral tradition but fairly little in the way of two-dimensional imagery. This left her free to invent some, and, in doing so, to create a complete visual drama, one with social and intellectual dimensions, a moral allegory about power and control, set in a male world, but with a woman taking the central role.

I wonder if her work's allegorical nature decided her palette. A 1988 study for the earliest large print in the show, "La Cena" ("The Supper"), is in bright colors: yellow, green and pink. The final version, though, is entirely in black, white and tones of gray, as most of her subsequent art would be. As in Kara Walker's black-paper silhouette work, the limited palette gives highly expressive narratives a little distance, makes them look stylized, choreographed, rather than fully naturalistic. The perceptual delay that results can heighten their mystery.

For Ayón, restricting herself to flat, monochromatic forms may have removed the burden of academic finesse. (She once claimed that she chose collography because she lacked drawing skills.) It certainly made her figures feel otherworldly, extraterrestrial. With their eyes staring from otherwise featureless faces, they're human, but not; culturally specific but broader than that, broad enough for her to introduce a range of cross-cultural references.

Sikán, with whom she said she identified, is everywhere, playing many roles. In “La Cena,” which depicts a version of the Christian “Last Supper,” she assumes the place of Jesus. Elsewhere, she’s St. Sebastian, pierced with thorns instead of arrows. In one astonishing altarpiece-like work, she undergoes a kind of crucifixion that is also a resurrection. When various sacrificial animals associated with Abakuá ritual appear — goats, fish, roosters — she caresses them protectively, and their bodies merge with hers. In some prints, she has the skin of a fish, each minute scale having been individually cut from paper and pasted to the printing sheet.



“Mokongo,” center, and “Sikán,” right, both from 1991.

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For all its beauties, the mythical world she half-invented, half-adopted is a disturbing one, with its drama of martyrdom, self-assertion and redemption unresolved, though it’s important to note that Sikán, though condemned to death, doesn’t die. There is even the suggestion that the magic, and the power it generates, stays in her hands.

What’s not in doubt is the effect of the work: Visually, it’s hypnotic. It absorbs your attention the way paper absorbs ink, gradually and lastingly. In a final series of comparatively small prints from 1997 and 1998, Ayón shrinks her panoramas to a tight circle, a kind of whirlpool of darkness, floating on a white ground. The titles sound as personal as diary jottings: “Let me Out!,” “One Must Be Patient,” “Groundless Fears.” Dimly, in the center of each pool, you can make out a face of someone either surfacing or being pulled down.

With Ayón, you want to be cautious about interpretation. There is nothing simple about her art, and research on it has only begun. This show, organized by [Cristina Vives](#), in collaboration with El Museo; the [Fowler Museum](#) at the University of California, Los Angeles; and the Belkis Ayón Estate, should help enormously. The estate, headed by Ayón's sister and niece, has carefully preserved the bulk of her art in the family home in Havana. It is thanks to them that it has survived. And it is thanks, at least in part, to the thaw in Cuba-United States relations initiated by the Obama administration that the work has finally traveled here.

NKame: A Retrospective of Cuban Printmaker Belkis Ayón

Through Nov. 5 at El Museo del Barrio, Manhattan; 212-831-7272, elmuseo.org