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NKAME: A Retrospective of Cuban Printmaker Belkis Ayón



© Estate of Belkis Ayón. Courtesy Landau Traveling Exhibitions

The Cuban artist's big, richly textured collographs—made by running collaged cardboard through a printing press—are populated by mysterious, silhouetted figures with piercing, almond-shaped eyes. They derive from the mythological world of the all-male, Afro-Cuban secret society Abakuá. Ayón, who took her own life in 1999, when she was thirty-two, was particularly fascinated by the female figure Sikán, who, legend has it, was sentenced to death for betraying Abakuá secrets to her lover. In these austere works, she is a commanding protagonist, portrayed alone with animals, or in tense scenes that refer to both Renaissance painting and Abakuá myth.

One room of the museum is filled with six lush iterations of the same scene, made in 1988, of an initiation banquet in which women replace the expected male apostles in the “Last Supper”-inspired composition. This edifying show suggests that Ayón may have sought to reflect, through her stylized lexicon, the sexual politics and economic turmoil of her time—and that she may have identified with the character of Sikán in deeply personal, even tragic, ways.