

Art Daybook: Belkis Ayón's Cuban perspective

By Molly Glentzer

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Photo: Molly Glentzer / Houston Chronicle

A portion of “La Cena (The Supper),” the last colorful collograph the late artist Belkis Ayón made before deciding that dire conditions in Cuba were best rendered in black and white.

The piece: “La Cena (The Supper)”

The Artist: Belkis Ayón

Where: In “Nkame: A Retrospective of Cuban Printmaker Belkis Ayón,” through Sept. 3 at the Station Museum of Contemporary Art, 1502 Alabama

Why: One doesn't have to be an art history expert to recognize the basic composition the late Cuban artist Belkis appropriated from Leonardo da Vinci's “The Last Supper” to create the matrix for her first major collograph, a type of print that begins with collage before ink is applied and the image is reproduced on paper.

In a show whose other large works are black and white, this colorful fragment draws the eye partly for its lively hues. But it also tells a complex story of art, life and activism in Cuba.

Ayón created the matrix in 1988, when she was 20. A year later, the collapse of the Soviet Union sent Cuba's economy into a tailspin that lasted until 1995. Cubans refer to that time as “the Special Period.” Unable to buy cheap petroleum that had long been imported from the Soviet Union, many people lived in austerity and near-famine conditions.

The colorful piece is one of three sections from the first edition Ayón made with that matrix; she never completed the other two segments. And when she returned to the matrix in 1991, she abandoned color. Aside from being extravagant, color did not reflect the dark essence of what she wanted to convey about the state of society.

From that point on, until she committed suicide by shooting herself in 1999, Ayón worked exclusively in black and white.

With “La Cena,” she wasn’t just reproducing “The Last Supper.” The same cast of Afro-Cuban characters appear in all of the show’s large collographs, adapted from a mythology called Abakuá that Ayón used as archetypal symbols to express ideas about the politics of power.

Curator Cristina Vives, who was a good friend of the artist’s, has taken this show across the U.S. since 2016 because she believes Ayón’s work has never been properly contextualized. “In the 1990s, better than newspapers, institutions, any public space or medium in Cuba, art was more active, reflexive and critical,” said Vives. “Many people, even my colleagues, considered Belkis a religious artist, a folk artist or a gender-issue artist. She had nothing to do with that.”

Although Ayón was internationally known during her lifetime, she didn’t capture the attention of museum curators like avant-garde conceptual sculptors such as Tania Bruguera and Los Carpinteros, who also were in Vives’ stable. “They were clearly political; the message was more direct, and they did installations. Prints were always considered more traditional. Few people in the critical world understood that Belkis was the same generation, with the same point of view and intentions but with a different media. It took time to understand.”

Vives hopes Ayón’s time has finally come. The massive collographs, each made in pieces, have been installed to seem more sculptural; some are affixed to free-standing walls. Some inch down onto the floor, so they seem more installationlike.

The technique alone is reason enough to look hard. Belkis didn’t use a pencil, Vives said. The figures and every detail — including the scales of the fishes and the textured look of clothing on characters and their skin — was produced with scissors, by cutting her multiple collaged materials or gouging designs into the matrix.

“She always said she didn’t know how to draw,” Vives said.

The show includes a few early works that illustrate Ayón’s development, as she discovered and began to identify with the Abakuá princess Sikán, whom she used to represent herself.

Vives pointed out another wall of smaller prints in the museum with titles that don’t reference religion or art history: “Harassment,” “Intolerance” and “Groundless Fears” to name a few. These are Ayón’s final works, all with imagery confined to tight, circular compositions, as if she could see no way out of her darkness.