

How Belkis Ayón's Explorations of Ritual Make for One of 2017's Best Shows

by [SIDDHARTHA MITTER](#)

AUGUST 22, 2017



"Resurrection" (1998) © ESTATE OF BELKIS AYÓN

In her late teens, the Cuban artist Belkis Ayón became fascinated by Abakuá, an ancient Afro-Cuban tradition centered on the transmission of sacred knowledge, shared in secret lodges restricted to men. Ayón was in art school in Havana at the time — the late 1980s — specializing in printmaking. Though Afro-Cuban herself, she had no personal or family connection to this rite, which was more obscure than Santería, with deep African roots.

Ayón would go on to study Abakuá, befriend its initiates, witness its ceremonies. With this information, she devised the original and striking artistic language she would develop throughout her career. Hers was an idiom dense with ritual figures and symbols, yet feminist — she empathized with the crucial female character in Abakuá mythology — and open to plural interpretation. Her medium was collagraphy, a painstaking technique that allowed for detailed texture and nuance in shading. She worked in black, white, and shades of gray, giving her prints — with their silhouettes devoid of facial features save for intently staring eyes — the air of ghostly symphonies.

Ayón's career was tragically brief, however. When she took her own life — with a gunshot to the head in her grandmother's house in Havana, in September 1999 — she was only thirty-two. But she left a large body of work, some two hundred pieces of breathtaking impact, many of monumental scale, made in her steadfast, utterly singular vocabulary.

“Nkame,” the Ayón retrospective now at El Museo del Barrio, is a jaw-dropping experience, perhaps the city's most arresting exhibition this year; the show also offers — amid the soul-sapping politics of the moment — a salutary injection of mystery. It takes us into the realm of ritual, but in the hands of an artist who identified as atheist, who deployed Abakuá myth (and its syncretic ties to Catholicism) in pursuit of a more private deliverance. It is also a journey to a particular time in Cuba, the “special period” after the fall of the Soviet Union severed the country's economic lifeline — a time of penury when Ayón, invited to show at the 1993 Venice Biennale, had to travel to the airport by bicycle, her father carrying her packed-up work — the dramatic eighteen-panel *Pa' que Me Quieras por Siempre*, on view in the retrospective — behind her on another bike.



“La Sentencia” (1993) ©
ESTATE OF BELKIS
AYÓN

Ayón was not completely unknown in the United States. In her final year of life, she had a gallery show in Los Angeles and residencies at the Rhode Island School of Design and three Philadelphia art institutions. Still, “Nkame,” which made a first stop at the Fowler Museum at UCLA last winter, is the first U.S. museum showcase for an artist whose brief career and iconoclastic approach might have consigned her to historical neglect. Instead, her friends and a family foundation, led by her sister Katia Ayón Manso, have doggedly cultivated her memory. Organized by Cuban curator Cristina Vives, this

show draws on a larger one held in Havana in 2009, also titled “Nkame” (Abakuá for *chant* or *praise*).

The current version has forty-three works, some the size of altarpieces. It is light on Ayón’s early career, when she won prizes while studying at the Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana. During this time she made mostly small pieces, still in color, with residual elements of abstract formalism; the turn to the dark, complex vision rooted in Abakuá happened in earnest once she graduated, in 1991. Smartly, the first room takes us through this process, affording a kind of Ayón 101 through a major work, *La Cena* (“The Supper”), which she first made in color in 1988 using a naïf-art palette of pink-yellow-green. Disliking it, she made a new, six-panel version in 1991 in black-and-white, to much more absorbing effect. Both takes are here, plus the original printing plates of cardboard glued with carefully cut paper of different textures and etched patterns, showing just how meticulous was her process.

La Cena establishes Ayón’s figural approach. The staging recalls the Last Supper, but the characters are unruly. Some sit, others stand; their gestures convey worry, expectation, distress. They seem androgynous. Ayón explained that she intended only two as male: the ones with dark faces wearing detached expressions. Even Ayón’s most liturgical images — such as the triptych *La Consagración* (“The Consecration”), also from 1991, which depicts the rise of an Abakuá *potencia*, or lodge — contain a turbulence. A character seems to have just shown up, or appears to be about to exit; another is camouflaged in the landscape; eyes stare, roll, squint; a hand appears with no corresponding body. Some have apparent male or female traits, but many seem gender-ambiguous.

Abakuá comes from the Ekpe “leopard lodge” societies of the Efik and other communities around Calabar, in southeast Nigeria; it regenerated among enslaved people in Cuba, adding traits over the centuries, but retained its core legends. A central figure is the princess Sikán, who when getting water at the river accidentally traps the fish Tanze, bearer of the divine voice that orders the world. After a complex series of events, Sikán’s sacrifice is deemed necessary to preserve the peace. The key female in a legend that includes kings, princes, diviners, and animals, she must die so the rest can go on.



Detail of “La Cena (The Supper),” (1991) © ESTATE OF BELKIS AYÓN

Ayón identified with Sikán, using her own body as reference for Sikán’s silhouette. A number of works have Sikán as subject, but in others she observes events — sometimes ones that will determine her fate. Her aspect changes: She may have fish scales on her body; she may carry the fish or appear with a rooster or goat — all references to ritual. The works are not explicit critiques, whether of Abakuá or of broader society, yet Sikán’s presence asserts a kind of critical privilege. “Like myself,

she led and leads... a disquieting life, looking insistently for a way out,” Ayón once said.

After years of making vast, Abakuá-inspired pieces, Ayón scaled down radically. In 1998 she showed, at the Couturier Gallery in Los Angeles, a series of circular prints, made in her distinctive style but constrained to a roughly two-foot diameter and shorn of legible myth. In several, a female figure appears — trapped behind a mask against a jigsaw background, caught as if in a whirlwind, or lost in a forest. Some were given melodramatic titles taken from Colombian *vallenato* folk songs.

Later, this direction of work would read as a clue to an ultimately unsolvable tragedy. “The action took place within a structure she had never used before,” writes Vives, the retrospective’s curator and Ayón’s friend. “What was really happening, however, was much deeper: Space was closing in on her. Unfortunately, we didn’t realize it.”

“Nkame: A Retrospective of Cuban Printmaker Belkis Ayón”

El Museo del Barrio

1230 Fifth Avenue

212.831.7272

elmuseo.org

Through November 5