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Overlooked No More: Belkis Ayón, a Cuban Printmaker Inspired by a Secret Male Society

She worked by applying materials to a printing plate rather than carving into its surface, in a palette of grays, to express the disquiet within.



Belkis Ayón in 1998

*Since 1851, obituaries in *The New York Times* have been dominated by white men. With [Overlooked](#), we're adding the stories of remarkable people.*

By [Sandra E. Garcia](#)
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In 1993, the Cuban printmaker Belkis Ayón, known for her signature collage-based style and her work reflecting the Afro-Cuban religion Abukuá, was invited to show at the Venice Biennale in Italy. She was determined to make it, despite obstacles in her home country. Cuba was going through an economic depression at that time, leaving it dark and uncertain, with drastic food and fuel shortages.

With no other way to get to the airport 20 miles from their home in Havana, she and her father mounted their bikes and started riding. Ms. Ayón raced ahead of her father, who rode with her work strapped to his bicycle. She made it in time to board, but he did not — and neither did her work (though it did eventually make the trip).

For Ms. Ayón, who was born Jan. 23, 1967, in Havana, art was how she communicated.

“It is the way, the manner, the solution that I found to say what I wanted,” she said in an interview in *Revolución y Cultura Magazine* in February 1999.

When Ms. Ayón was small, her bountiful energy exhausted her mother, who when the girl was 5 enrolled her in an art program at the Máximo Gómez library in Havana. Ms. Ayón flourished and began to enter national and international art competitions, winning awards and honors. In 1976, her work was featured in a painting competition for children in Hyvinkää, Finland.

Belkis was the only girl who won a prize, taking second place, her sister, Katia, said in an interview from Havana.

Ms. Ayón’s use of collagraphy, a printing method that involves applying materials to a plate rather than carving into its surface, took her around the world. But even as she traveled, “Belkis liked to have fun, and hang out with her friends from school,” her sister said. “She was mature enough to be able to do both, and we all marveled at her ability.”

Katia went on, “She still liked to spend time with her friends at home. She liked to cook them her favorite dish, spaghetti with ham and cheese.”

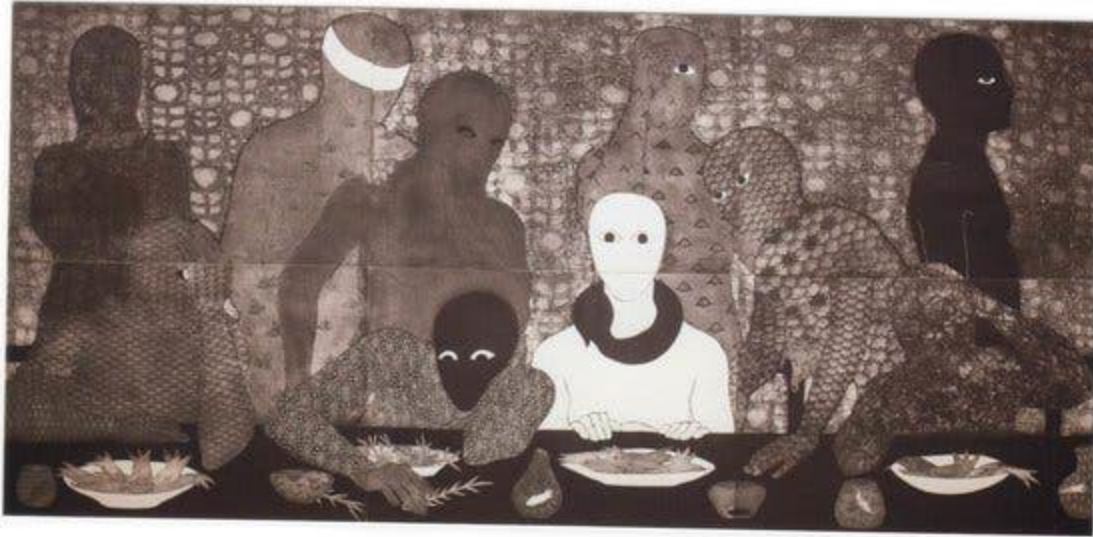
At 19, Ms. Ayón began studying at the Instituto Superior de Arte. When she graduated, she joined the faculty there.

For Cubans, permission to travel outside the country was rarely granted, but Ms. Ayón was granted the ability to travel for her work. She would bring back supplies and magazines for her students, treating them to things they could not easily find in Cuba, a testament to her warmth and generosity.

Her art was stoic, less colorful — she worked almost exclusively in gradients of black, white and gray — yet stunning. Her work focused on Abakuá, a secret religious fraternity.

The female characters in Ms. Ayón’s works are without mouths to represent the absence of women in the Abakuá religion. Women are not allowed to participate in the society, but for Ms. Ayón, they were still a presence. She said her obsession with Abakuá was born out of curiosity.

For her, the subject had “more to do with life than with religion,” she said in an interview in 1999. “I am mostly interested in questioning humanity, the fleeting feelings, the spirituality.”



Ayón's work "La Cena" (1991) depicts a version of the Christian "Last Supper," replacing the Jesus figure with the princess Sikán. Credit: Michael Nagle for The New York Times

[Cristina Vives](#), a Cuban curator and friend of Ms. Ayón's, who put together "NKame," an Ayón retrospective currently at the [Kemper Museum](#) in Kansas City, Mo., said Ms. Ayón was "a master of collagraphy."

"The textures she achieved were of an incredible variety — the subtleties in the degradation of inks in the entire range of blacks to grays, the cleanliness of the white spaces was exquisite," Ms. Vives said.

Ms. Ayón believed the eyes in her works were the most captivating part of her pieces, some of which were mural-sized. The whiteness of the eyes created a stark contrast to the blacks and grays that filled her works.

"People are intrigued because the eyes look at you directly," Ms. Ayón said in her interview with *Revolución y Cultura*. "I believe that you cannot hide — wherever you go they are there, always looking at you, making you an accomplice of what you are seeing."

According to Ms. Vives, Ms. Ayón's work "transcended the two-dimensionality and the quasi-domestic scale of traditional collagraphy, creating a three-dimensional installation."

Times art critic Holland Cotter [reviewed "NKame"](#) in 2017 when it was at [El Museo del Barrio](#) in Manhattan. He said that for a time, Ms. Ayón's work was "slotted into a 'Latin American' category that limited its reach." But he said, "With Ayón, you want to be

cautious about interpretation. There is nothing simple about her art, and research on it has only begun.”

The Cuban government was wary of religious art but according to her sister, Ms. Ayón’s work was never targeted, and that did not change Ms. Ayón’s feelings for Cuba. “She was very proud of being Cuban,” Katia said.

Ms. Vives turned out to be a savior for Ms. Ayón’s Biennale appearance. When she heard that her friend’s work did not make it to Italy, she found an Italian woman who was traveling from Cuba to Milan to transport it. Two days later, “Pá que me quieras por siempre,” which translates to “so you love me forever,” made it to the Biennale. That piece is part of the “NKame” exhibition, and Ms. Vives refers to it as the gem of the show.

Ms. Ayón committed suicide at home Sept. 11, 1999, age 32. Her family and friends said they didn’t know why. They equate her greatness as an artist with her vulnerability.

It is possible the vastness of Ms. Ayón’s work can fill in some blanks.

“These are the things I have inside that I toss out because there are burdens with which you cannot live or drag along,” Ms. Ayón said of her art the year that she died. “Perhaps that is what my work is about — that after so many years, I realize the disquiet.”