

The Guardian

On show at last: the myths and mysteries of Belkis Ayón, a giant of Cuban art

The short but brilliant career of the printmaker is explored at her first European retrospective in Madrid, 22 years after she died



Belkis Ayón with the original colour print of *La Cena (The Supper)*, 1988. Photograph: Belkis Aylón Estate/Reina Sofía Museum

Sam Jones in Madrid
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Their creator is long gone, but Belkis Ayón's figures live on in syncretic shadow and silhouette, forever slipping between realms and roles, borders and beliefs.

Over the course of a short but brilliant life whose final years were profoundly marked by the chaos that the collapse of the Soviet Union visited on her native Cuba, Ayón established herself as an artist whose technical skills were matched only by the haunted and hallucinatory intensity of her imagination.

Today, Ayón – hailed as one of the outstanding printmakers of the 20th century – is the subject of an overdue retrospective at the Reina Sofía museum in Madrid. The 90 or so works assembled for the show that started last week chronicle the obsessions and shifting phases of a career that ended when Ayón killed herself, for reasons that still remain a mystery to her friends and family, in Havana in 1999. She was 32.

While many of her contemporaries were dabbling with installations, Ayón embraced the graphic technique of collography as a medium through which to explore her fascinations – not least with Abakuá, a secret, all-male society that was brought to Cuba by west African slaves in the early 19th century.

Her collographs – made by sticking a collage of materials to backings such as cardboard, covering it with ink and then putting it through a printing press – return, time and time again, to Abakuá rites and beliefs.

Recurrent in her work is the figure of Sikán, a princess and the only female character in Abakuá mythology. Sikán's fate is sealed after she discovers Tanze, a sacred fish sent by the supreme god that will bring peace to an embattled region. She is ordered to remain silent about the discovery but shares her secret with her fiancé, who is from an enemy land. Her perceived betrayal leads to her execution, but with her dies Tanze.

In Sikán – whom Ayón saw as “the principal character, the mother of every Abakuá, the great sacrificed initiator” – the artist saw a reflection of herself and other marginalised yet pivotal women. Sikán becomes her alter-ego and the character appears repeatedly as Ayón moves from colour to black, white and grey, and begins to fuse Abakuá beliefs with Christian motifs such as the Last Supper, the Stations of the Cross, and the Resurrection.

“These Abakuá legends were passed on orally and what Belkis does is give that oral tradition a visual form,” says Manuel Borja-Villel, the director of the Reina Sofía. “But what she does is also personal because although this is a secret male society, the central figure is Sikán, a female figure who ends up being sacrificed by the community. That idea of a masculine society where the key figure is a woman has a lot to do with Belkis Ayón's position.”



Two works at the Reina Sofía show in Madrid. Photograph: Museo Reina Sofía

But as the show's curator, Cristina Vives, points out, Ayón's work must also be seen in the context of life in Cuba following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. As familiar certainties disappeared and shortages of food and petrol hit, Cuba was pitched into crisis overnight.

“People usually talk about it as an economic crisis, but it went far beyond mere economic crisis,” says Vives. “It was a crisis of values in which the entire socio-economic structure and its accompanying ethical beliefs tumbled down before the eyes of every single Cuban.”

According to Vives, Ayón and her fellow Cuban artists sought to “reflect, question and criticise their reality” in their work while also trying to make ends meet.

The artist’s participation in the 1993 Venice Biennale got off to a less than auspicious start. She cycled the 30km from her home to the airport with her brother-in-law, Ernesto Leyva, carrying her bags on his bike, and her father following with her art on his. The artist and her bags made the flight, but her pieces did not because her father fell too far behind, meaning the precious cargo missed the plane. Fortunately, her exhibits finally arrived in Venice a few hours before the biennale began.

Leyva laughs about the airport dash and smiles at the memory of his sister-in-law. “Belkis was always a daring girl and she was really funny,” he says. “But she was also headstrong and serious. She came to be well known in the artistic community of Havana – and the whole country – and she knew how to party. But when it was time to work, she always knuckled down.”

Ayón could also be relied on to help her fellow artists, supporting them emotionally but also materially by bringing much-needed supplies back from her foreign trips.

Her final works drifted away from Abakuá and focused instead on mixing the lyrics of Latin American popular songs with self-referential images and musings on the veil with which St Veronica wiped Jesus Christ’s face on the way to Calvary. Their titles talk of deep wounds, the agonies of love, assault, fear and abandonment – many of the pains endured by Ayón’s alter-ego, Sikán.

Twenty-two years on, the artist’s death remains a puzzle to all those who knew her. “We’ve never known why she did it,” says Leyva. “We couldn’t believe it when we heard – and it still hurts now.”

Vives, who was also a close friend of Ayón, hopes this first European retrospective will enable people to see an “ethical artist but also a very civic-minded woman” whose ferocious creativity transcended her life, circumstances and personal preoccupations.

“Belkis Ayón built a universal discourse against marginalisation, frustration, fear, censorship, intolerance, violence, powerlessness and the lack of freedom,” says the curator. “Her work still serves to send out the message that her country – and humanity – needs to hear.”

Belkis Ayón: Collographs is at the Reina Sofía until 18 April 2022