

## From a former wrestler to a fearless printmaker: five unusual artists at Art Basel

The fair's Feature sector, dedicated to historical rediscoveries, includes works by Belkis Ayón, Rosalyn Drexler, and Senga Nengudi.

### **Senga Nengudi**

#### **Presented by Thomas Erben Gallery, New York**

American artist Senga Nengudi is known for her sensuous sculptural installations made of nylon stockings, which she pulls tautly across exhibition spaces, fills with sand, or invites performers to engage with through dance. 'I am working with nylon mesh because it relates to the elasticity of the human body. From tender, tight beginnings to sagging [...] the body can only stand so much push and pull until it gives way, never to resume its original shape,' she said. A pioneer in the Los Angeles avant-garde art scene of the 1960s, Nengudi's early works were heat-sealed vinyl casings filled with colored water, which she invited viewers to touch, shake, or press. She also created larger water-filled works affixed to walls with ropes whose forms were dictated by the force of gravity. Alongside her installations, Nengudi staged street performances bringing together musicians and dancers in unexpected locations including a space under a highway bridge. She has long been inspired by West African masquerade, improvisational jazz, Gutai, and Fluxus performance; art forms which continue to shape her oeuvre.

### **Rosalyn Drexler**

#### **Presented by Garth Greenan Gallery, New York**

An award-winning playwright, novelist, and former wrestler, the American artist Rosalyn Drexler is finally being recognized for her contribution to the 1960s Pop Art movement. She began her career experimenting with found objects, creating sculptures before turning to collage. She started culling figures from commercial advertisements, movie posters, celebrity magazines, and newspapers. Often enlarging the figures she found, she would then paste them onto canvases, placing them on a background of solid bright color which she painted flatly. Stripped of their original context, the images threw into sharp relief the objectification of women and social issues of alienation and racism. Whether it was painting a scene of a man slapping a woman or depicting a man forcefully pinning down a woman's arm as he kisses her, Drexler uncovered uncomfortable truths about violence, intimacy, and gender roles.

### **Belkis Ayón**

#### **Presented by David Castillo, Miami**

Cuban printmaker Belkis Ayón, who died at the young age of 32, tackled themes of power, fear, sacrifice, and silence in her collagraphs. Living in Havana following the fall of the USSR in 1991, she worked against the backdrop of a country that was mired in economic and political turmoil. At a time when it was difficult to source art supplies, she pasted textured materials including vegetable peelings, scraps of paper, acrylic, and sandpaper onto a cardboard matrix, painting

over the surface and carving into it. Putting the matrix through a hand-cranked press, she created dramatic black-and-white prints. Throughout her brief but prolific career, she was fixated on depicting Sikán, a mythological princess and the only female figure in Abakuá, a secret, all-male Afro-Cuban society thought to be brought to Cuba through the slave trade from Nigeria and Cameroon. Her prints are populated with mysterious oblong headed figures with elaborately patterned bodies and dramatic almond eyes, set against deep velvety black backgrounds. While the story of Sikán is centered on a major act of her betrayal, Ayón celebrates her in an act of resistance against the patriarchal nature of Cuban society at the time.



Left: *Desobediencia (Disobedience)*, 1998. Right: *Añoranza (Yearning)*, 1998. Both artworks by Belkis Ayón. Courtesy the Estate of Belkis Ayón and David Castillo.

## Lynne Cohen

### Presented by Jacky Strenz, Frankfurt

Laboratories, lobbies, living rooms, police schools and shooting ranges. Whether it's a domestic or institutional interior, the works of the late American-born photographer Lynne Cohen are filled with a strange tension. In her hands the most quotidian environments appear menacing or even absurd. The scenes she captured with flat lighting appear stark, clinical, and almost staged but she simply photographed what she saw. Often shooting in large format, she wanted viewers to easily imagine themselves physically entering the spaces she depicts and completing the narrative of what may have transpired in the place. 'My work has always been about psychological, sociological, intellectual, and political artifice,' she once said, adding that she was also 'preoccupied by deception, claustrophobia, manipulation and control.'

## **Sonia Delaunay**

### **Presented by Galerie Zlotowski, Paris**

Sonia Delaunay's childhood was steeped in color. Born in the village of Gradizhsk, in the former Russian Empire in 1885, she had vivid memories of attending weddings in which women wore colorful dresses adorned with vibrant ribbons which fluttered in the wind as people danced. In 1909, four years after having moved to France, she met her artist husband Robert Delaunay, with whom she became a central figure of the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Parisian avant-garde. Together they developed the idea of Simultanism, a technique in which they created striking paintings filled with interlocking or overlapping planes of contrasting or complementary colors. Sonia Delaunay became known for dynamic works composed of vibrant concentric circles and geometric patterns. Soon, she ventured beyond fine art into the fields of fashion, design, and decorative arts. Over the course of her career, she experimented with clothing, stage design, mosaics, and bookbinding. She also adorned everyday objects such as carpets, cushions, and even the exterior of a car with her bold designs.

- Payal Uttam