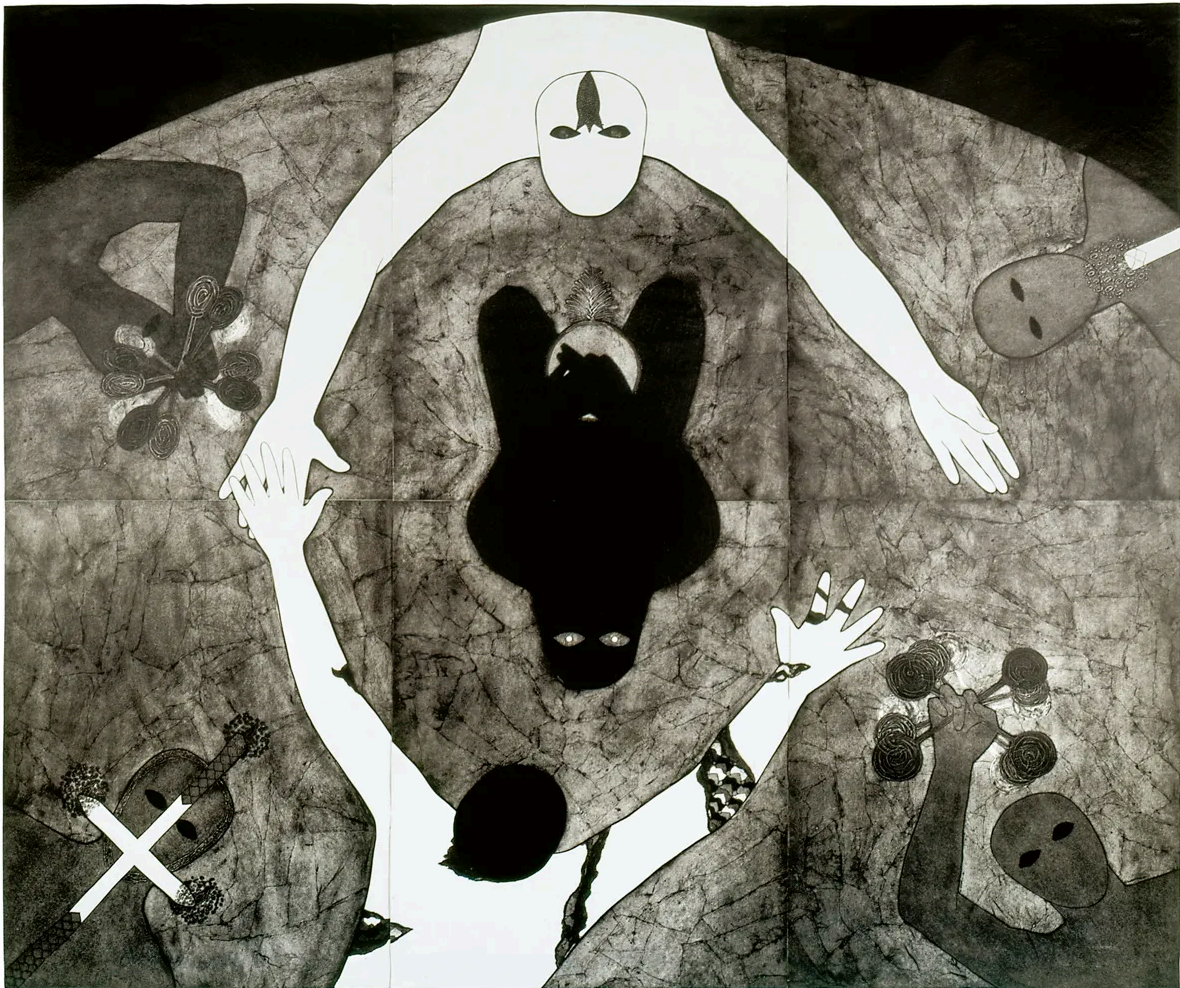


**ARTnews**

# Belkis Ayón's First Gallery Show in the 25 Years Since Her Death Aims to Continue the Artist's Legacy

BY CAROLINA ANA DRAKE

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Belkis Ayón, *Ya estamos aquí (We Are Here)*, 1991. PHOTO SEBASTIAAN HANEKROOT/COURTESY BELKIS AYÓN ESTATE AND DAVID CASTILLO

In the decade before her death, in 1999 at age 32, artist **Belkis Ayón** stumbled upon the mythological story of Sikán in a book about Abakuá, a secret Afro-Cuban fraternal organization exclusive to men. At the time, she had been painting with vivid colors, but

as she delved deeper into the story of Sikán, her palette would shift to blacks and whites, with an emphasis on light and shadow.

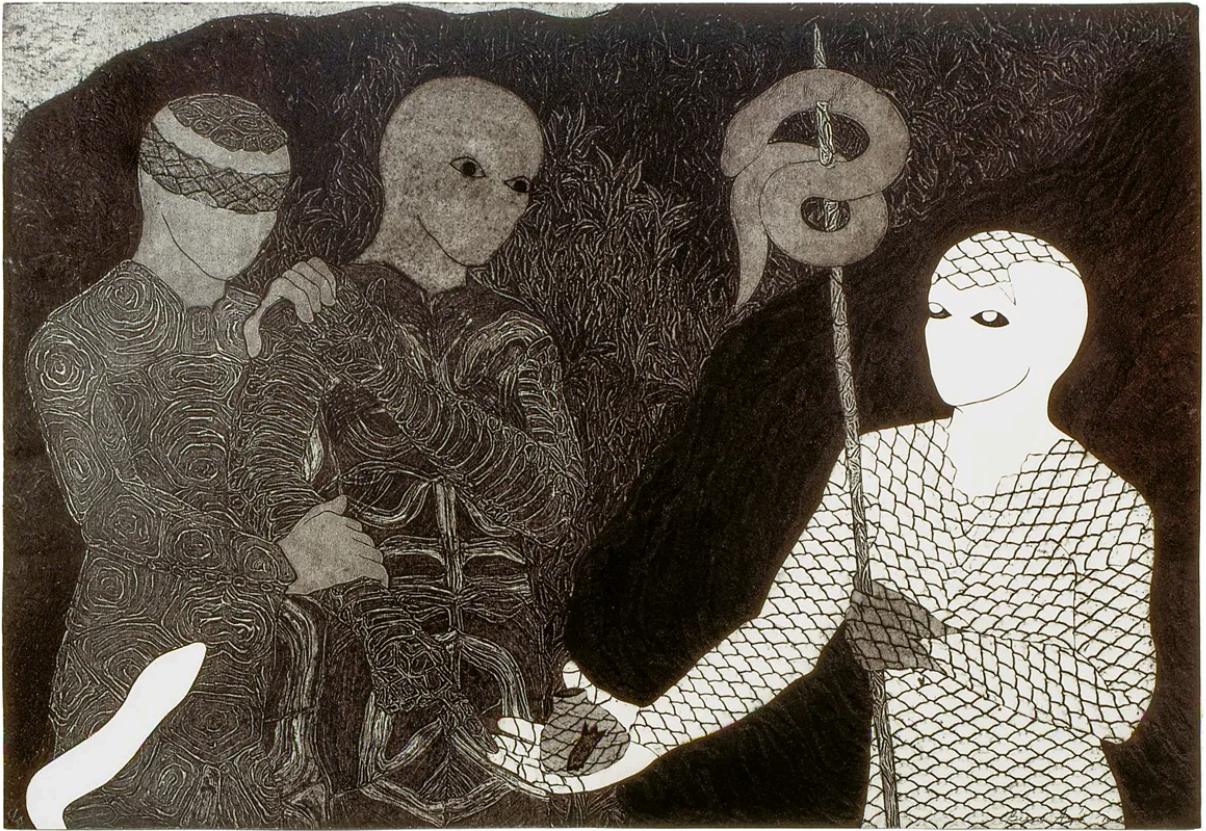
“Sikán is the woman sacrificed by men in an attempt to obtain her sacred voice,” Ayón once said in a 1993 interview.

It is these Sikán-related works that would garner acclaim for Ayón, who was born in Havana in 1967. Her art would be included in the 1993 Venice Biennale, the 1994 Havana Biennial, and the 1997 Gwangju Biennale. More recently, her 2016 retrospective would travel to five US cities, including Los Angeles, New York, and Houston, as well as the 2022 Venice Biennale, surrounding a sculpture by Simone Leigh. And now, it is the subject of an exhibition (through April 25) at Miami gallery David Castillo, the artist’s first commercial showing since her death 25 years ago.

At the gallery, each work is a door into the artist’s imagination. Organized chronologically and presenting pieces made between 1989 to 1999, the exhibition begins with Ayón’s first representation of Sikán in *Sálvanos Abasi* (Abasi Save Us), from 1989, where a genderless figure with dark, fathomless eyes, no mouth, and a small sacred fish hanging from her necklace stares intensely back at the viewer. In the myth, Sikán, a princess, accidentally catches a sacred fish, considered the reincarnation of a king, that jumps into her bucket while she fetches water from a nearby river. This fish contained the secret voice that would lead whoever cares for it to prosperity. When the Abakuá men learn of this, they send serpents to scare Sikán and then sacrifice her, believing the fish’s secret voice to have entered Sikán’s skin.

Ayón continues with her own version of this story, looking for openings and closures in the myth. In 1993’s *Vamos* (Let’s Go), a genderless figure that appears to be Sikán has fish scales now encrusted on their body as they present the sacred fish to the other phantasmagoric figures. In *Siempre Vuelvo* (I Always Return), also from 1993, Sikán is depicted as risen and resurrected into a dark cosmos. Her mouth remains covered, her hands crossed. Beneath her spirit, three bodies appear to be those that sacrificed her, gesturing upward.

But, Ayón didn’t simply want to reproduce this myth. “My goal is to synthesize the aesthetic, visual, and poetic details that I find in the *Abakuá* mythology and to add my vision,” she said in a 1999 interview that is included, along with the 1993 one, in a monograph accompanying the Miami exhibition, published by [NAME]. With her unique printmaking technique called *colografías* (collagraphs) she collaged materials of different textures onto a rigid matrix (usually cardboard) using what little was available—scraps from textiles, fruits, and found materials—in Cuba at a time of scarcity due to the ongoing US embargo on the country.



Belkis Ayón, *Vamos (Let's Go)*, 1993. PHOTO SEBASTIAAN HANEKROOT/COURTESY BELKIS AYÓN ESTATE AND DAVID CASTILLO

Ernesto Leyva, Belkis Ayón's brother in law and the director of the Belkis Ayón Estate, recently recalled how difficult this decade, also called *El Período Especial* (the Special Period), was for Cuba and its artists. Electricity was rationed and blackouts were frequent, meaning Ayón likely created her world of myth and mysteries in candlelight or near darkness. Similarly, whenever Ayón traveled outside Cuba, she returned with art materials for her students, as materials were nearly impossible to find on the island.

Even getting to the airport could be a struggle. "In 1993, Belkis needed to get to the airport with her artworks so that she could attend the 45th Venice Biennale," he told *ARTnews* in Spanish during a recent phone interview. The bus never arrived, so Leyva, along with Ayón's husband and her father, bicycled the artist, her suitcases, and her artwork to Havana's main airport. "It took us two hours to get from the east to the west of the island, but Belkis made it to the airport before her flight left. I still remember that day," he said.

And it is within this context that Ayón's series related to the secret society of Abakuá emerged. Perhaps, that covertness appealed to the artist as a refuge, one in which she

was free to create. “Those eyes look at you very directly,” Ayón said in a 1999 interview, speaking about the figures she depicted. “So you cannot hide: wherever you move, they are always looking at you...”

**Dealer David Castillo knew he was standing before** something powerful when he first saw Ayón’s work almost 10 years ago. His connection to her work deepened as he learned more about her work and her influence, not only to her students but generations of artists who have come-up since her passing. “She was never an overlooked artist. This show is just a continuation of her career when she was alive,” Castillo said.

The works on view in the current gallery show are not for sale. In 2023, Castillo showed works by Ayón at two different Art Basel editions, those works were reserved for select museums, and not available to private collections. The gallery, which has worked with Ayón’s estate since 2015, also helped facilitate the acquisition of a major multi-panel work each by the Museum of Modern Art in New York (at Art Basel in Switzerland) and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. (at Art Basel Miami Beach).



Belkis Ayón’s first Sikán-related collagraph, *Abassi, sálvanos* (Abassi, Save Us), 1989. PHOTO SEBASTIAAN HANEKROOT/COURTESY BELKIS AYÓN ESTATE AND DAVID CASTILLO

In showing works at a commercial gallery that are not for sale, Castillo said, “This is about promoting the artist’s legacy and continuing the work we have done with the estate during these years.”

Each artwork is a remnant of the artist’s kingdom where she found the freedom and power, with ink and imagination, to rewrite an ancient legend. Circling the gallery, Ayón’s life mirroring that of Sikán’s tragic character—the figures morphing and maturing through the years—becomes clear. An untitled work from 1999, one of the last collographs Ayón created, shows five of Ayón’s signature enigmatic figures. Three of these ghostly presences quietly observe the main figure whose index finger gestures toward the heavens. One of the members crosses their fingers, gesturing luck or divine protection, while the fifth one looks directly at us.



Installation view of "Belkis Ayón," 2024, at David Castillo, Miami. PHOTO ZACH BALBER/COURTESY BELKIS AYÓN ESTATE AND DAVID CASTILLO

Shelley R. Langdale, a curator at the NGA who helped the museum acquire the Ayón work for its prints and drawings collection, said that while Ayón's Sikán series is highly specific to the time and region of its making, she also sees it as having resonance across multiple religions and cultures. "Drawing on different sources, Ayón sought a common ground for spirituality," Langdale told *ARTnews*.

Noting Ayón's untimely death, she added, "The mystery of where she would have gone with her work remains."