

VISUAL ART

LEGENDARY CUBAN PRINTMAKER BELKIS AYÓN FINALLY GETS MIAMI DEBUT

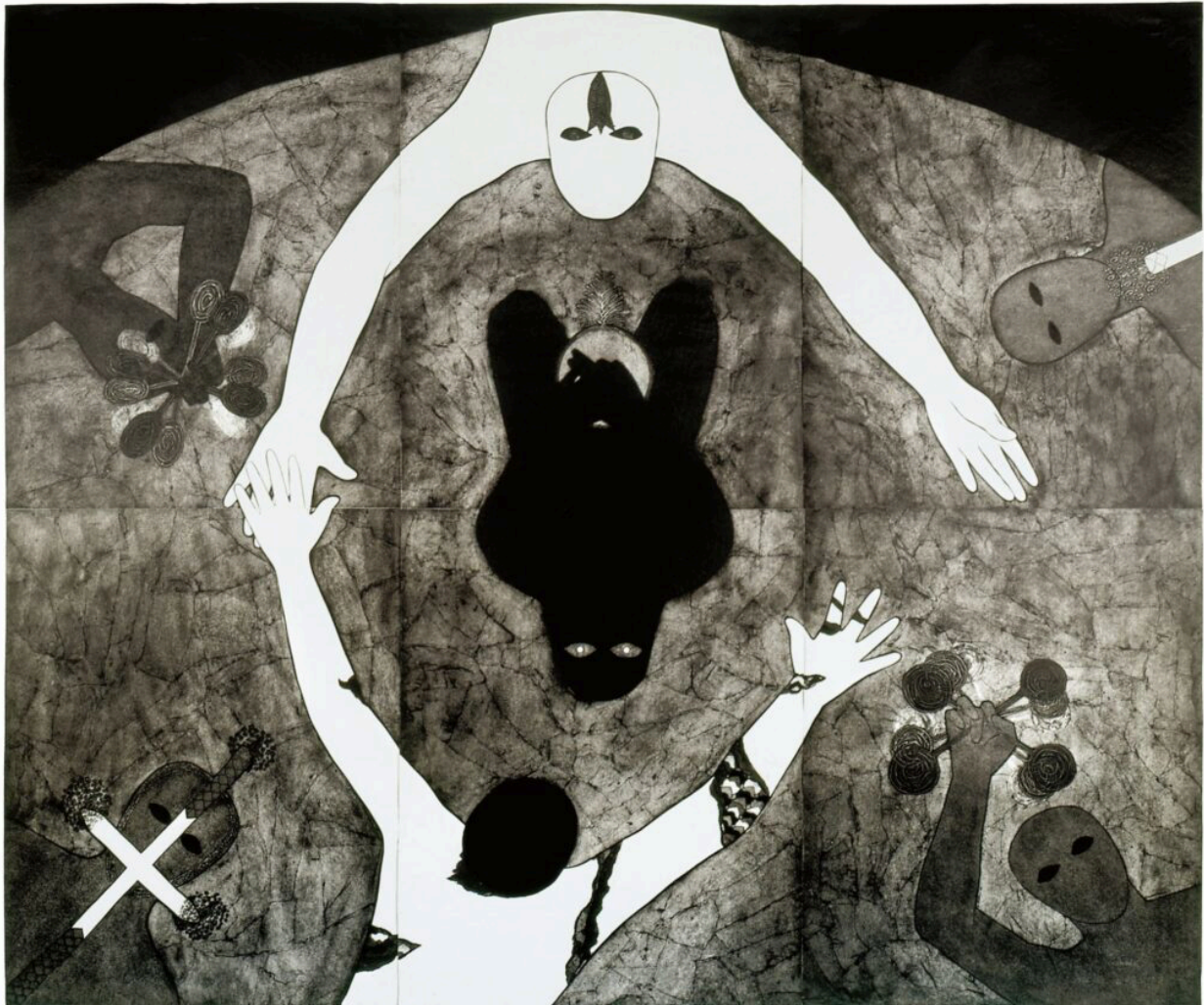
Written By Douglas Markowitz | March 4, 2024 at 3:40 PM



Belkis Ayón, "Sin título" ("Untitled"), is one of the works on display in an exhibition of the late Cuban printmaker's work at Miami's David Castillo Gallery through Thursday, April 25 (Photo by Jose Figueroa, courtesy Belkis Ayón Estate & David Castillo)

Few artists have a style as distinctive as the late Cuban printmaker Belkis Ayón. In her stark, monochromatic images, figures are featureless, black-and-white silhouettes, devoid of any facial features save for snakelike eyes. They look like aliens or otherworldly beings. In fact, they are spirits, and Ayón drew from a unique, Afro-Cuban mythology to create them.

Ayón's work is the result of painstaking research into the Abakuá, an Afro-Cuban secret society open only to men. Their complex system of rituals, myths, and iconography was extensive, but little visual representation of it existed, giving the artist license to develop her own interpretation. As a result, a dense web of mysterious symbology – snakes and crosses, goats held like babies and shadowy figures wearing leopard skins and fish scale armor – weaves through the artist's work, corresponding to, but not fully analogizing, the Abakuá mythology. Characters such as Sikán, a princess sacrificed for revealing Abakuá secrets, and Abasí, a creator god, reoccur.



Belkis Ayón, "Ya estamos aquí" ("We Are Here") (Photo by Sebastiaan Hanekroot, courtesy Belkis Ayón Estate & David Castillo)

"My goal is to synthesize the aesthetic, visual, and poetic details that I find in Abakuá mythology and to add my own vision," Ayón, who died by suicide at 32 in 1999, said in a 1993 interview, "which is, of course, simply the vision of an individual observing all this great mythology, which I treat with enormous respect and care."

Respect and care have been crucial to preserving Ayón's legacy, according to Miami-based art gallerist David Castillo.

"It's paper, so it has to rest," he says. "The works have to go through periods where they're not shown, they're not exposed to light, they're packed safely."

Indeed, Ayón's embrace of the collagraph, a unique form of printmaking that few other artists have utilized extensively, is also part of what makes her work unique. And as work on paper, it also presents distinct challenges. Unlike other printmaking processes like lithography that can produce multiple copies of the same image, a collagraph print is always one of one, each imbued with unique qualities from the temporary materials used in the printing process. Ayón would use found objects to enhance these unique prints, a task that was compounded in difficulty by the deprivations of life in Cuba after the fall of the Soviet Union.¹



"It was a period of enormous scarcity in Cuba, so she had to be very resourceful with what inks she had access to, what materials. So, she used everything from vegetable peels, found materials, to create the textures and gradations in her collagraphs. I would say that's a very significant thing for why the artist has continued to be so important to contemporary art conversations 25 years after her death, and why there are younger artists who devote the research within their own practice to her work."

Surprisingly, such an important Cuban artist has never had a solo show in Miami, inarguably the heart of the Cuban diaspora. Ayón's work has been featured in group shows around the city recently, including the Museum of Art and Design at Miami-Dade College's well-regarded "Where the Oceans Meet," and Castillo brought a group of her collagraphs to Art Basel Miami Beach in 2021. Her work is also held in the Pérez Art Museum Miami.

That's finally changed thanks to a show currently at David Castillo Gallery through Thursday, April 25. It shows some of the artist's finest works and compiles them in a monograph published by local bookmaker [NAME] Publications featuring two archival interviews. Two of the prints on display have been picked up by major museums: "Resurrección" ("Resurrection") will go to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, while the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. acquired "Untitled (Woman in Fetal Position)."

It's the culmination of a multi-year strategy from Castillo, working with Ayón's estate, to expand her reputation within the U.S. and internationally. "I've been working with the estate for nearly 10 years, and they release very few works for sale at a time," he says. "And so my role, when I came on board with the

¹ Image: Belkis Ayón, "Abasí, sálvanos" ("Abasi, Save Us") (Photo by Sebastiaan Hanekroot, courtesy Belkis Ayón Estate & David Castillo)

estate, has been to place the work with institutions. Because the work is rare, because there's not a lot remaining, it's not just up for sale to people with money, necessarily. It really is important to preserve the artist's legacy."

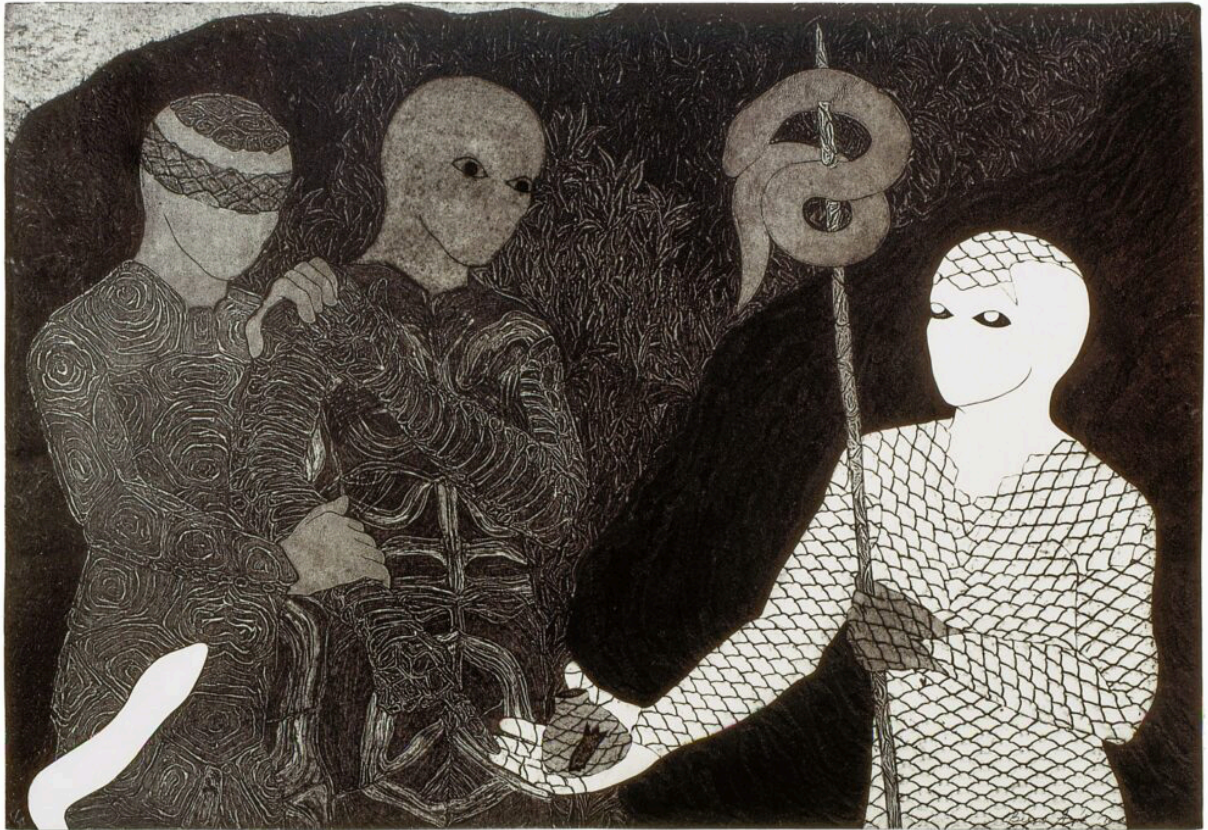
Starting in 2017, the estate organized a series of museum solo shows, starting at the Fowler Museum at UCLA in Los Angeles. That show, titled "Nkame: A Retrospective of Cuban Printmaker Belkis Ayón" traveled to El Museo del Barrio in New York as well as institutions in Scottsdale, Houston, and Kansas City, and led to Ayón's first retrospective in Europe, a 2021 show at Spain's Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. More shows are planned, including one at Modern Art Oxford in England, according to Castillo.



*An exhibition of late Cuban printmaker Belkis Ayón's work is at Miami's David Castillo Gallery through Thursday, April 25
(Photo by Zach Balber, courtesy Belkis Ayón Estate & David Castillo)*

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Belkis Ayón, “Vamos” (“Let’s Go”) (Photo by Sebastiaan Hanekroot, courtesy Belkis Ayón Estate & David Castillo)

During her lifetime, Ayón was one of Cuba’s most celebrated artists, both on the island and internationally. She participated in biennials, including Venice in 1993, won the Cuban Prize for National Cultural Distinction in 1996, and held several residencies within America. Her death in 1999 slowed her recognition as a major artist, as her estate launched a multi-year effort to study and catalog her work. But did not stop it entirely, according to Castillo.

“I don’t think there’s been a period where curators were not interested in her work, or where people were not writing about her work, or where artists were not researching her work to make work about her work,” he says. “I do believe that her ascendancy would have continued unbroken, had she not died 25 years ago.”

WHAT: "Belkis Ayón"

WHEN: 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday. Through Thursday, April 25

WHERE: David Castillo, 3930 NE 2nd Ave., Miami

COST: Free

INFORMATION: 305-573-8110 and davidcastillogallery.com