

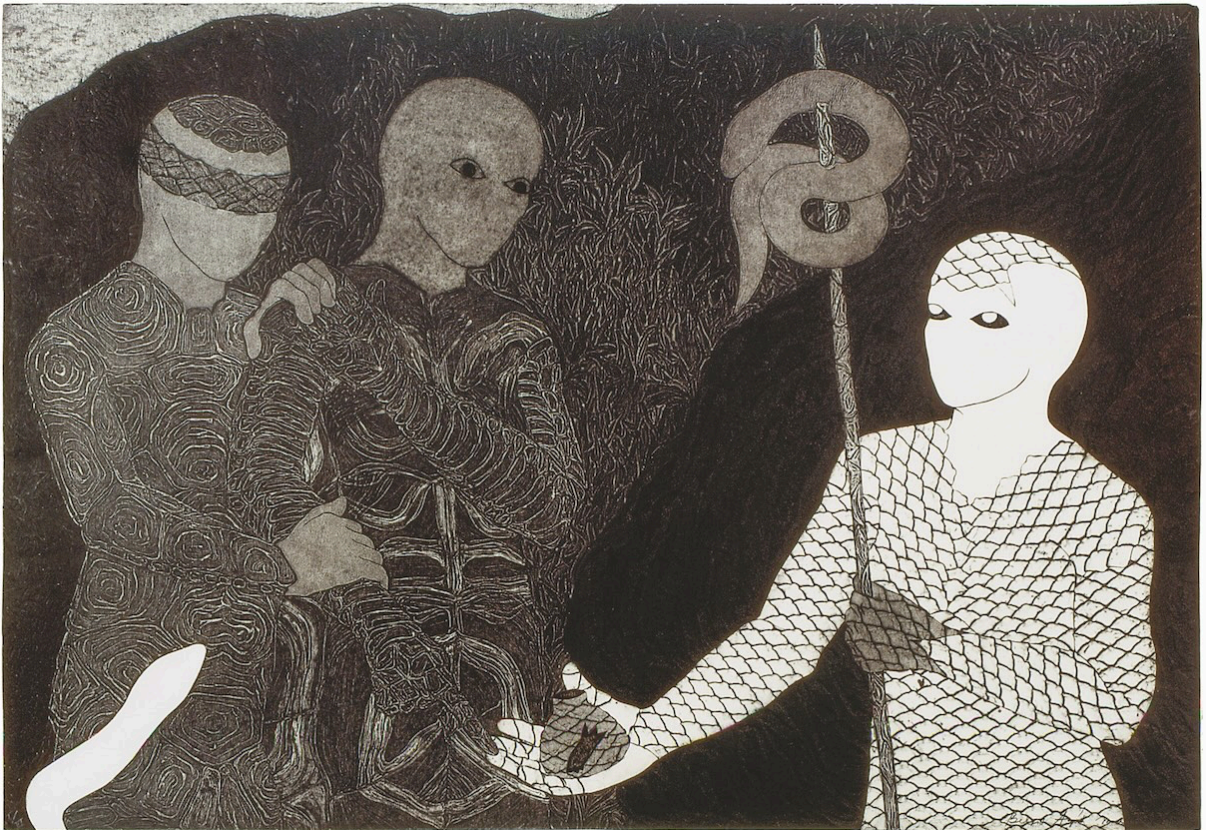
SURFACE

ART

Belkis Ayón's Prolific Legacy Is Not for Sale

In Ayón's first posthumous gallery exhibition at Miami's David Castillo Gallery, the dealer and the artist's estate chart a new chapter of her career with a show of 15 works—none of which are for sale.

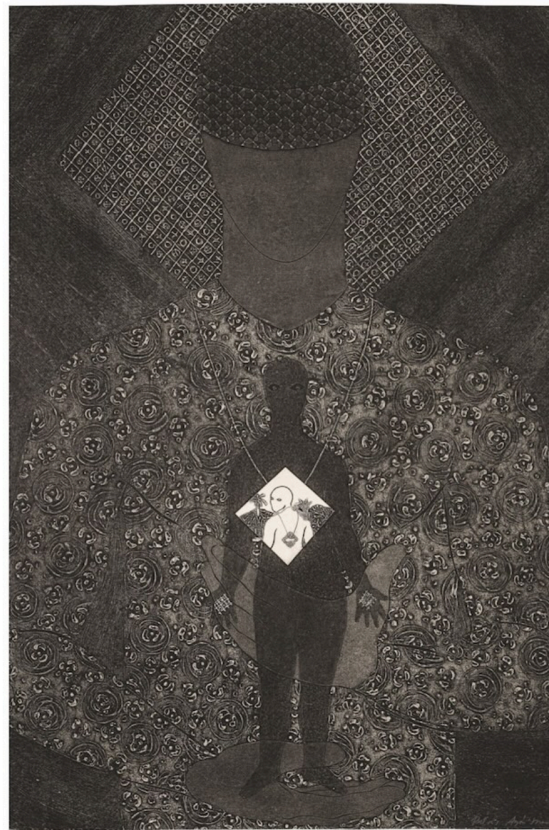
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Belkis Ayón should need no introduction, but for the uninitiated, the late Cuban artist created a prolific body of work that articulated her perceptions of her culture, its folklore, her

perceptions of gender roles, and broader societal hierarchies, just to name a few predominant themes. She worked, to great acclaim, largely in the medium of collographs created amid the scarcity and turmoil of Cuba's Special Period. Collographs, essentially multimedia collages adhered onto printing plates, is a medium Ayón popularized through her depictions of eerie scenes from the lore of Afro-Cuban secret society Abakuá. Following the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991, the remainder of the decade was characterized by the rationing of food, power, and other vital resources in the face of severe scarcity.

To this day, there is a larger-than-life mythos surrounding Ayón's achievements and her family's unending support during this period: when public transit failed the artist, her brother-in-law, husband, and father used bicycles to transport Ayón and her art for the 45th Venice Biennale across the island to make her flight. Their support, along with her talent, determination, and the haunting mysticism of her oeuvre endeared her to the global art world before her untimely death in 1999, at just 32 years old. Since then, her work has continued to captivate the market. Her legacy has been honored with exhibitions at UCLA's Fowler Museum, Madrid's Museo Reina Sofia, the 59th Venice Biennale, the 34th Bienal de São Paulo, Art Basel (where David Castillo facilitated a MoMA acquisition), and Art Basel Miami Beach, where the gallery sold another work to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.



L: ¿Arrepentida? (Regretful?), 1993, Collograph; R: Sin Título (Hombre con Sikan en sus manos) [Untitled (Man with Sikan in his hands)] 1993, Collograph.

It feels reductionist to call Castillo a “dealer.” His impassioned support of keeping Ayón’s legacy alive and discoverable—both for a rising generation of art enthusiasts and an evolving society that is gradually making sense of her visionary talents—is not motivated by profit or other market-driven capitalist machinations. Since 2015, he has worked with Ayón’s estate, which was founded in 2003 by the artist’s late older sister Katia. Together, they facilitated exhibitions of Ayón’s work and sales to public institutions. But private collectors are not permitted to acquire her art. Instead, Castillo and Ayón’s estate have focused their efforts on international biennials, museum acquisitions, and shows at academic institutions, or what Castillo sees as “all the categories that affect the long-term legacy of the artist: major institutions, critical acclaim, ongoing museum retrospectives, and establishment of a firm international market.”

In a swaggering art market focused on one-upmanship and collecting as a means of access to works of progressively grander value, Castillo’s philosophy represents a change of pace we can get behind. The gallerist has continued to collaborate with Belkis’s surviving relatives Ernesto Leyva, Yadira Leyva Ayón, and Yaisa Leyva Ayón, who now oversee her namesake foundation. “It has been a bringing together of my background as an art historian with 30 years of experience as an art dealer, 20 years with the gallery,” he says. “Bringing

Belkis' work, in collaboration with the Belkis Ayon Estate, to more and more international audiences is one of my personal great achievements.”



Ya estamos aquí (We Are Here), 1991, Collagraph.