

The Guardian

The Observer Art
Review

Belkis Ayón: Sikán Illuminations; Bettina von Zwehl: The Flood review – singularly strange

Modern Art Oxford; Ashmolean, Oxford

The huge, bold, myth-inspired prints of the late Cuban artist Belkis Ayón dramatically launch a revamped Modern Art Oxford. At the Ashmolean, a cabinet of curiosities...



Laura Cumming

Sun 3 Nov 2024 04.00 EST

Belkis Ayón was a charismatic and vividly original Cuban artist who took her own life in 1999, at the age of 32. She left behind a body of work so distinctive – enormous prints, in black and white, using spartan cardboard – that it is hard to imagine what she would have made next. But at the end of this startling exhibition, which presents more than 40 works, there is a sense of something more personal stirring in her art’s singularly strange and intricate mythology.

Born and raised in Havana, the daughter of a former fighter in the Angolan civil war, Ayón came upon the secretive and insular brotherhood of Abakuá – a kind of Afro-Cuban freemasonry – through rumours and newspaper stories in childhood. It gave her the characters, myths and narratives that underpin her art. What you see are giant friezes – black on white, white on black, and many shimmering greys between – set in forest glades, nameless caves, even beneath the ocean, in which sinuous figures with watchful eyes appear in outlandish scenarios.

A female figure, covered with fish scales, stares directly at us, cradling a soft goat on her shoulder. A man with a mist-grey body and white head, crowned with an upright cockerel, casts a furtive glance to one side. Chieftains, dotted with leopard spots, preside over initiations involving pineapples, Christian haloes, palm fronds and curiously Celtic-looking insignia. They are scaled to the size of Latin American murals or of altarpieces in Catholic churches, some of them 10ft high. You look into them, to discover their meaning, and find it both alluring and opaque.

What she wanted to express in the poverty of 1990s Cuba, when paint was hard to come by but cardboard was cheap, was exceptionally bold

At first, they have a kind of graphic glamour that speaks of more contemporary art. You may think of the black on black silhouettes, pierced with white eyes, of the African American painter Kerry James Marshall. But Ayón is working in a wildly different medium. Her prints can have the appearance of suave linocuts, until you notice that there are actual impressions, almost dents, running like reliefs through the surface. Ayón was a pioneer of collography, a complex and hardwon technique in which the artist assembles collages on cardboard surfaces and then inks them to press down on paper.

A film from 1998 shows the artist hard at it in the printmaking workshop of the Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana, where she studied and later taught. According to her colleagues, Ayón laboured alone for long hours in this factory-like barn. She loved the creation of these collages, and the freedom to make prints as large as she liked. Of the collographic process she remarks it just “seems to me the most appropriate technique to express what I want”.

And what she wanted to express in the devastating poverty of 1990s Cuba after the fall of the USSR, when paint was hard to come by but cardboard was cheap, was exceptionally bold. Her

version of the Abakuá mythology, with its founding legends involving snakes and fish, and the ritual sacrifice of the woman who discovered their secret fraternity, was avowedly feminist, in Castro's patriarchal Cuba.



'Avowedly feminist': *La cena (The Supper)*, 1991 by Belkis Ayón. Photograph: Courtesy of the Belkis Ayón Estate and David Castillo

In *La cena* – a kind of *Last Supper* – the figures are women, in defiance of the Abakuá's all-male membership, and Jesus is replaced by poor doomed Sikán, who discovered the society's secrets. And while the meaning of these works can hardly be the same for Europeans as Cubans, it seems significant that contemporary elements creep in – the crisscrossing straps, for instance, of a labourer's overalls.

Ayón's graphic gifts run from the minutest inflection of an eyelid or contour that, ever so subtly, differentiates male from female. Her figures have no hair, no other features than eyes; radically simplified, they nonetheless suggest innumerable expressions. Here and there she adds a single primary colour: a scarlet woman breaks a fish above her head, as if it were a glass, scattering seeds that gradually turn into tears. Daggers become snakes, fish double as elegantly closed eyes. Complex print effects are achieved – merman bodies seen through nets, seen through roiling waves. I have not seen anything quite like it.

Fish, goat, halo, snake: interpreting the Abakuá allegories would be a consuming task were it not for the atmospheric strength of these works, which gathers in the later works. A woman tries to wrench off her own face, irresistibly suggesting a self-portrait. The titles turn away from myth. In *My Vernicle or the Deep Wound*, from 1998, a woman holds up her own veil of Saint Veronica: a cloth bearing the image of a man in a Colombian hat. Ayón, a wall text explains, had a passionate but fugitive relationship with a Colombian.



La sentencia, 1993. Photograph: Courtesy of the Belkis Ayón Estate and David Castillo

But strongest of all is *The Sentence*, from 1993. Sikán, eyes wide with shock, learns of her fate. A snake wends its white trail through the print, and a white hand holds up its palm like a stop sign. Upon it, marked with the inkiest black of all, is a devastating cross.

Modern Art Oxford has had a facelift – you can now enter straight into a glowing red cafe from the street, and take your children to draw in a homely wooden studio. A few streets away, at the Ashmolean, they have found many other ways to entice a new public. The latest is the German artist **Bettina von Zwehl** (born 1971), who has sifted the museum's prodigious wonders and come up with a *wunderkammer* of her own.



'Prodigious wonders': Bettina von Zwehl: *The Flood*, featuring a 'terrifying' wrought-iron cradle. Photograph: Ellie Atkins for the Ashmolean

This includes a miniature theatre that doubles as a doll's house-sized camera obscura; imaginary watercolour landscapes and painted hybrid creatures; gigantic photographs of tiny shells that suddenly appear planetary; and tiny mushrooms assembled into a magical forest archipelago. For outright strangeness, nothing quite compares to the terrifyingly sharp, wrought-iron cradle presented to the museum by Elias Ashmole himself in 1677. But what is fascinating about Zwehl's mind and work is the way she widens your eyes, so to speak, to the eccentric, unique and astounding objects in this great museum, reawakening your sense of curiosity.

Star ratings (out of five)

Belkis Ayón ★★★★★

Bettina von Zwehl ★★★

Belkis Ayón: Sikán Illuminations is at Modern Art Oxford until 9 February.

Bettina von Zwehl: The Flood is at the Ashmolean, Oxford, until 11 May.