NKAME

A retrospective of cuban printmaker

BELKIS AYÓN
El Museo del Barrio is deeply grateful to have the opportunity to host this ground-breaking exhibition of the work of Belkis Ayón in our galleries. This projects serves to further El Museo’s commitment, initiated by former Chief Curator Debora Cullen in 2010, to explore the work of significant yet under-recognized women artists. The initial concept was to present an entire year of retrospective exhibitions on women artists. This was finally initiated in 2014, with the presentation of a show of work by the New York-based Venezuelan pop art star Marisol, organized by the Memphis Brooks Museum and curated by Marina Pacini. This was followed in 2015 by the presentation of paintings and collages by RoCa/ (Gloria) Rodríguez Calero curated by Alejandro Anreus.

This year, El Museo has been able to present two significant exhibitions on women artists, one on the work of the filmmaker Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, organized by the Perez Art Museum Miami and curated by María Elena Ortiz, and this current exhibition of the large-scale prints of Belkis Ayón. The genius of Belkis Ayón is evident throughout her body of work, she is clearly one of the most important figures in the modern art history of Cuba. The narratives seen here, beautifully woven together by the curator Cristina Vives, evoke the varied levels of reality that are explored by the artist, poetically, metaphorically, and through pattern and texture, figure and form.

El Museo is deeply grateful to the Jacques and Natasha Gelman Foundation for their generous funding of El Museo del Barrio’s Women’s Retrospective Series. Without their vision and support, this series of exhibitions would not have been possible. We are equally grateful to the visionary support of the Speaker of the New York City Council, Melissa Mark Viverito, whose commitment to and love for El Museo has always been important to us. We hope you enjoy these stunning works.
I have always found writing on any topic difficult, but I feel I must do so now to acknowledge fully the great printmaker Belkis Ayón. As I write these lines, exactly sixteen years, eight months, and twenty-four days have elapsed since she left us, but she has always remained present in our thoughts and our memories and in her works. For us, her family, it has been as if traveling a long hard road—constantly learning without time for weeping or mourning. She was capable of mobilizing and drawing people of dissimilar characters and interests together in a single project, making them work toward the same objective. We recall her advice, always of-cate, group, classify, and physically preserve the more than two hundred works that she made in her short but fruitful life. As the artist’s estate, our first and foremost duty has been to look after her and her teachings.

During these last sixteen years, the Ayón-Manso family has worked hard to safeguard and promote Belkis’s work. As heirs to the artist’s estate, our first and foremost duty has been to locate, group, classify, and physically preserve the more than two hundred works that she made in her short but fruitful life. As the family itself lacked the necessary knowledge and skills to achieve all these ends, we followed the spirit of collaboration that Belkis taught us and called upon close friends, who have since be-
BELKIS AYÓN REVISITEd

Cristina Vives

The first work by Belkis Ayón that I ever saw was the color version of La cena (The Supper, 1988). It was exhibited at a small gallery in Havana, and although the artist was only twenty at the time, I immediately realized that La cena marked a turning point in Cuban printmaking. Years later, I would reflect that there were three defining moments in Belkis’s career: The first occurred in 1986, when, while still an art student, she decided that the Abakuá fraternal society (its origin myth, symbolism, and manifestations) would constitute the language of her aesthetics and ideology. Her decision that the printing technique known as collography was the tool best suited to her purposes was the second. The third arrived, when after experimenting with color, she decided that white, black, and the near infinite tones of gray would be the best way to translate the existential drama of her Abakuá subject matter, as well as of her country and herself reflected through it. La cena is the work that perhaps best epitomizes these three moments. With it, Belkis also enlarged the potential readings of her work by merging the Abakuá myth and its protagonists with other religious and symbolic systems, which, like early Christianity and Catholicism, shared many representational codes. The membership of the La Sociedad Secreta Abakúa (The Abakuá Secret Society), however, hardly surpasses twenty-one thousand, making it of relatively little significance within Cuban social and religious networks. One might ask, therefore, why Belkis chose it as her focus?

In the more than ten years of our friendship and professional collaboration, Belkis and I spoke about nearly everything, but it was not until late 1997, when I curated her last solo exhibition collaboration, Belkis and I spoke about nearly everything, but it works. One might ask, therefore, why Belkis chose it as her focus?...
8 sketches resembling arches, niches, and altarpieces typical of medieval or classic architecture. In one of these notebooks, she remarked:

I discovered that at that time no other artist was working on [Abakuá], but on others such as Santería, Voodoo, Spiritualism and Palo Monte [...]. There is not a figurative iconography, except, of course, for the signatures. Then I saw that there was a possibility. There was a whole world that I could perfectly conceive starting from what I already knew:4

Thus Belkis denied the poetic, mystic, nostalgic, feminine (but not feminist), and even psychological interpretations that some critics made of her work. Instead, she revealed an aesthetically pragmatic and timely intellectual intention and strategy.

She therefore set out to establish a physical structure for a mythical universe that was not only visually nonexistent but also ideologically proscribed in Cuba. She was exploring something that society feared to accept openly.5

The Abakuá who have valued my work are mostly intellectuals, and one way or another they identified with the project. Up to now I have not found any disparager. The mystery of the legend itself, how well some of the meanings have been hidden throughout history, is precisely what has given me the opportunity to make certain speculations.6

She took possession of this uncharted territory, camouflaging the “I” and “here” according to what circumstances required. Her clear choice of this method of appropriation does not in any way minimize the authenticity of her work, which lies in her creative honesty, the depth of her research and her personal talent.

Although Belkis’s work was often exhibited as part of the “new Cuban art,” it was not

4 Ibid.

5 It was not until 1995 that the Communist Party of Cuba admitted membership to anyone adhering to a religious sect. Such membership conferred political and social legitimation.

always credited as being in dialogue with the works of other artists who were attempting the same goal. She was not featured in a number of exhibitions that "launched" the most "conceptual and questioning" Cuban artists of the 1990s internationally. As for the critical commentary to date, most of it is regrettably devoted to narrating the Abakuá myth. There is often an enormous distance between the actual intention of an artist, the interpretations of scholars and critics, and the perceptions of the public. The art establishment can make or break an artist and his/her work. In the case of Belkis, her work was simultaneously "made" and "broken." For Belkis, a change was necessary, she needed to divest her work of the Abakuá myth and its symbolism and to devote her research to herself in what was tantamount to a form of exorcism.

In late 1997, Belkis and I were organizing her most recent engravings, still in the print shop at ISA, for an exhibition at the Couturier Gallery. These works were markedly different. They were no longer murals composed of multiple sheets to form huge installations—pieces that were monumental not only in their dimensions but also in their visual and narrative grandiloquence. Instead the new prints were circular with a diameter of no more than eighty centimeters. The action took place within a structure she had never used before. What was really happening, however, was much deeper: space was closing in on her.

Unfortunately, we didn't realize it.

Belkis Ayón is now acknowledged for her merits as a teacher and promoter of young artists, as curator of avant-garde engraving exhibitions, as a bridge of understanding between generations, and as a leader. She altruistically accepted these roles. Perhaps unwittingly, she followed the Ten Commandments: she didn’t offend or lie, she was not greedy or envious of other people’s assets, she never took for herself what belonged to others. She appreciated her friends deeply and even tried to see the best in her very few enemies. She did everything she could to achieve and to have us come closer to a level of social performance that was ultimately impossible.

Belkis was not perfect. She was excessively idealistic, often demanding from others what they could not give, and she never knew how to say no. She was not well prepared to accept mediocrity, especially in art. She felt insecure professionally and questioned each of her actions and works. She was also immensely frustrated when she had to acknowledge that the reality she hoped for didn’t exist. She heard everyone, but seldom spoke herself. We didn’t know how to listen to her last words.

Belkis committed suicide on a Saturday morning, September 11, 1999, in the neighborhood of Alamar in Havana. And I lost a close friend.
Mi alma y yo te queremos
(My Soul and I love you), 1993
Collograph
970 x 670 mm

¡Déjame salir!! (Let me out),
1997
Collograph
1000 x 750 mm

© Mi alma y yo te queremos (My Soul and I love you), 1993
Collograph
970 x 670 mm
BELKIS AYÓN MANSO

Orlando Hernández

Pa que me quieras por siempre
(To make you love me forever), 1991
Collograph
4367 x 2100 mm

Their traditions were known in Cuba as carabalíes. It was probably in Cuba that Abakuá acquired its mutual aid and protection functions, which were also exercised by the cabildos de nación in response to the prevailing conditions of slavery.2 The Abakuá Society was established in Cuba around 1836, and it has been active ever since in the cities of Havana, Matanzas, and Cárdenas, and strange as it may seem, nowhere else outside of Cuba.

A very short version of the myth of the Abakuá refers to Princess Sikán of the Efik (Efor, Efó) nation, who one morning went to the Oddan (or Odane) River to collect water in a vessel or gourd and unknowingly trapped a mysterious fish that would bring peace and prosperity to those who caught it. The strange bellow of the fish represented the voice of a deified ancestor, King Obón Tanze, who was also a manifestation of Abakú, the Almighty God. When she placed the gourd with the fish on her head, Sikán heard the sound (Uyo) and was the first to know the great secret, since she was automatically consecrated. With the authorization of Iyamba, Sikán’s father, she was immediately hidden by Nasakó, the diviner, in a place in the bush to avoid the disclosure of the secret among the neighboring nations who also wanted to possess the fish. Sikán, however, told the secret to her boyfriend, Prince Mokongo of the Efik, when she appeared before the Efik to claim his right to share the secret. A pact was made with the Efik to avoid war, but Sikán was condemned to death for revealing the secret. Nasakó attempted by means of magic to get the fish to make its sacred sound. The fish died, however, and Nasakó built a drum with its skin in an attempt to resuscitate its voice, but the voice was very weak. He tried to use the skins of different animals, a snake, crocodile, deer, and ram, but the voice was never heard again. He then decided that Sikán’s blood could attract the spirit of Obón Tanze, and Sikán was sacrificed by Ekeños to invite the miracle. Sikán’s skin, however, was of no use in building the sacred drum (Ekeño), and the skin of a male goat (mborí) was used instead, a sacrifice carried out by the twins (abere) Abenián and Aberián. When the Ekwe was consecrated, all the hierarchies and rituals of the Abakuá Secret Society were established. These are a meticulous representation of a very complex drama.4

Very little remains of the secret character that this institution has prided itself upon over time. Ethnography has explained many details of its myths, rites, language, music, and intricate graphic symbols (ang/bordóns), as can be seen in books by Fernanda Ortz, Lydia Cabrera, Enrique Sosa Rodríguez, and other specialists on the subject. Belkis Ayón’s art preserves those mysteries in a respectful way. She may have learned about them in these same books and in conversations with obonekúes, or initiates, of that society, and then added others, mixing and overlapping them. To the old mysteries that came from Africa, she added new ones, typical of a black Cuban woman of the end of the twentieth century, with her troubles, concerns, and ideas. And, although unlike Sikán, she was not the victim of sacrifice, she chose to commit suicide after leaving one of the most impressive artistic legacies in the history of Cuban art.

There is still much research to be done to discover the content and purpose of Belkis Ayón’s work, and this should be done in the future.

New light is being cast on the history of Cuban art. The Von Christierson Collection was published by the Watch Hill Foundation, London, during the exhibition of the same name, which opened in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 2010. See the Web site for the collection: http://www.withoutmasks.org.

1This essay, in slightly different form, originally appeared in Orlando Hernández, Without Masks: Contemporary Afro-Cuban Art, The Von Christierson Collection. It was published by the Watch Hill Foundation, London, during the exhibition of the same name, which opened in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 2010. See the Web site for the collection: http://www.withoutmasks.org.

1See her Web site www.ayonbelkis.com

2See her Web site www.ayonbelkis.com

3In the late sixteenth century, the Spanish colonial government authorized the cabildos de nación, which brought together enslaved and formerly enslaved Africans from the same ethnic, territorial, and linguistic backgrounds. The councils had their own festivals; practiced their own religions, music, and dances; served as mutual aid fraternities; and elected their own leaders (called kings and queens) who represented them before the Spanish colonial government. Although they were created as a means of controlling enslaved peoples, they also served as centers of resistance, allowing for the preservation and transmission of African identity. The councils ceased to exist in Cuba after 1888.

4We have based our information on the version of the myth in Tato Quiñones’s essay “La leyenda de Sikán: Origen del mito abakuá,” in Ecorie Abakuá (Havana: Ediciones Unión, 1994).
most knowledge and are therefore authorized to say what Bel-
kis’s artistic language expressed. Other transversal readings are
necessary to allow us to distinguish between the real contents of
the myth, rituals, and Abakuá symbols, which constitute the true
cultural and spiritual wealth of the group, and those that are the
fruits of the imagination, creativity, and the artist’s personal in-
terpretation. Without these comparative readings, we will always
fail short of a true understanding. Belkis created a new version
of the myth, a contemporary artistic version, somewhat differ-
ent from the versions that tradition attributes to the ancient Efik,
Efut, and Oru peoples, but her artistic myths were based on actual
myths that still preserve their religious function in Cuban society.
It is therefore necessary to take them into account as a starting
point for a deeper understanding of her work. It is not enough to
admire the uncommon beauty and the technical perfection of her
prints in the abstract, but rather it is necessary to understand the
meanings of those other discourses that she expressed through her
work.

Despite the fact that the references in Belkis’s work are un-
questionably bound to the African and Afro-Cuban tradition, and
that they essentially preserve many premodern features, in many
cases the atmospheres where the events develop, as well as the
expressions and postures of the characters, send us back to tradi-
tions that we don’t link easily with Africa, but with Christian Eu-
rope, sometimes reminiscent of a medieval and pre-Renaissance
architecture, with allusions to the paintings of Giotta, Piero della
Francesca, or Fra Angelico. The solemnity, the elegance, even the
gentleness in her work refer us inevitably to such European tradi-
tions. For the first time in the representation of an all-male tradi-
ition of warring characters bold as the Abakuá, it was possible to
neutralize that violent, impulsive aspect, replacing it with corre-
cction, with manners, with a label that is very far from the African
or Afro-Cuban stereotype that we know. Occasionally, Belkis even
took well-known episodes of biblical history, such as the Last Sup-
per, and overlaid them with episodes of the sacred history of the
Abakuá. What could Belkis’s intention have been in such cases?
Perhaps it was not so much syncretism with the Catholic tradition
present in our traditions of African origin. There must be more
than this, a less-visible intention, perhaps to break down the neg-
ative clichés that still exist about this Abakuá—often considered
a bloody and even criminal brotherhood—and to allow for a less-
prejudiced approach to its extraordinary aesthetic, symbolic, and
poetic values.

It is curious that in almost all her works Belkis herself served
as model for the representation of Sikán. The shape of her body,
her head, her face, her eyes constantly appear in her prints replac-
ing the body, the head, and the face, and the eyes of Sikán. With this
replacement, Sikán stopped being represented solely by a male
animal, the male goat (mbo), which is sacrificed in a substitution
ritual, or by the simple signature, or a sigil, with which Sikán is
represented in an abstract, symbolic way. In Belkis’s works, Sikán
became a woman once again, a black Cuban woman with feel-
ings, ideas, opinions. Belkis’s presence as Sikán allows the ancient
mythical situation constantly reenacted in the rituals to become
human and contemporary, thus making visible the real and daily
content that the mechanics of every ritual tend to hide or forget.

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