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Fowler Museum presents first solo U.S. museum exhibition of Cuban artist Belkis Ayón

Nkame: A Retrospective of Cuban Printmaker Belkis Ayón opens October 2, 2016



Belkis Ayón, *La cena* (The Supper), 1991, collography, 138 x 300 cm. Collection of the Belkis Ayón Estate.

(Los Angeles, CA)—The Fowler Museum at UCLA is pleased to be the first museum in the United States to host a solo exhibition dedicated to the work of the late Cuban visual artist Belkis Ayón (1967–99), whom during her short but fertile career, produced an extraordinary body of work central to the history of contemporary printmaking in Cuba.

Nkame: A Retrospective of Cuban Printmaker Belkis Ayón opens Oct. 2 and runs through Feb. 12, 2017. The exhibition presents 43 prints that encompass a wide range of the artist's graphic production from 1984 until her untimely passing in 1999. Ayón mined the founding narrative of the Afro-Cuban fraternal society called Abakuá to create an independent and powerful visual iconography. She is highly regarded for her signature technique of collography, a printing process in which a variety of materials of various textures and absorbencies are collaged onto a cardboard matrix and then run through the press. Her deliberately austere palette of subtle tones of black, white, and gray add drama and mystery to her narratives, many of which were produced at very large scale by joining multiple printed sheets.

“For a black Cuban woman, both her ascendancy in the contemporary printmaking world and her investigation of a powerful all-male brotherhood were notable and bold, said Marla Berns, Shirley and Ralph Shapiro Director of the Fowler Museum. *Nkame* follows a lineage of Fowler exhibitions that have explored artistic representations and evocations of African-inspired religions in the Diaspora, such as *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* (1995) and *Transcultural Pilgrim: Three Decades of Work by José Bedia* (2011).

“This is an important moment to spotlight the aesthetically stunning and poetically resonant prints of Belkis Ayón,” Berns continued, “especially with today’s heightened attention on Cuba and Cuban culture, and the historic reopening of diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Cuba.” *Nkame* is organized by the Belkis Ayón Estate and Dr. Katia Ayón with the Fowler Museum and is guest curated by Cristina Vives, an independent curator and art critic based in Havana.

About the Exhibition

The exhibition is arranged into five sections that examine major themes and periods of Ayón’s artistic production. The introductory section begins with one of Ayón’s most iconic prints, *La cena* (The Supper) from 1991, a work that encapsulates three defining features of the artist’s oeuvre. First, her choice of subject matter—the history, mythology, and iconography of Abakuá—was a direction she took in 1985 while still a student at the San Alejandro Academy of Fine Arts (a prominent Cuban high school). This all-male Afro-Cuban brotherhood arrived in the western port cities of Cuba in the early 19th century, carried by enslaved Africans from the Cross River region of southeastern Nigeria. A brief synopsis of the founding myth of Abakuá begins with Sikán, a princess who inadvertently trapped a fish in a container she used to draw water from the river. The unexpected loud bellowing of the fish was the mystical “voice” of Abakuá, and Sikán was the first to hear it. Because women were not permitted this sacred knowledge, the local diviner swore Sikán to secrecy. Sikán, however, revealed her secret to her fiancé, and because of her indiscretion she was condemned to die.

In Ayón’s work however, Sikán remains alive, and her story and representation figure prominently. In *La cena*, which depicts an Abakuá initiation banquet with Sikán seated in the center, the artist reveals her syncretic approach. The work alludes to the Last Supper and the Christian apostles, but Ayón renders the event with women usurping the roles of men.

Second, *La cena* is a superb example of the artist’s choice of collography as the technique for creating her narrative prints and intensifying their expressive potential. The exhibition includes Ayón’s complete matrix for *La cena*, which she rendered in six units to produce six printed sheets that were assembled together. The inclusion of the actual cardboard matrix allows visitors to see how Ayón developed her pioneering and labor-intensive process of “drawing” with unusual materials: chalk, varnish, acrylic, sandpaper, abrasives, and different types of paper, using knives to obtain dark lines and scissors to cut the hundreds of patterns that she later glued to the surface of her cardboard matrices. When they were inked and sent through a

press, the artist achieved a range of forms, textures, and tones. Third, after experimenting with color, Ayón reduced her palette to white, black, and gray.

The second section of the exhibition focuses on the artist's early prints, made while she was a student at the San Alejandro Academy and then later at the Higher Institute of Art/Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA) in Havana (1986-91). This early work shows the artist translating her research on Abakuá into renditions of its mythology by focusing on its key characters in Cuba as well as in Nigeria.

In section three, Ayón's early prints capture the role Sikán played in the Abakuá narrative, told via a recognizable and repeated iconographic vocabulary. Sometimes seated in a frontal position on throne-like furniture, the stylized figure of Sikán appears magisterial with her wide-eyed

defiant gaze and no mouth. Ayón wrote, "I see myself as Sikán, in a certain way an observer, an intermediary and a revealer... Sikán is a transgressor, and as such I see her, and I see myself."



Belkis at the Havana Galerie, Zürich, August 23, 1999. Photo by © Werner Gadliger.

The fourth section of the exhibition features Ayón's large-format prints created between 1991 and 1998. These monumental works transcend the limits of traditional printmaking formats. Ranging from six to eighteen printed sheets, they allowed her scenes and characters to reach almost life-size. In these technically masterful and evocative works Ayón also widened her vision of the Abakuá myth, moving from individual characters and their attributes to depictions of ritual events of nearly epic dimensions: the consecration of an initiate, the funeral of

a dead Abakuá member, the reincarnation of the spirit.

These scenes also blend references to Catholicism, and

the artist saw them as symbolically traveling the Stations of the Cross.

The last section of the exhibition highlights the work the artist produced in 1998 before her death in 1999. For her last solo exhibition *Desasosiego* (Restlessness), held at Los Angeles' Couturier Gallery in March 1998, she made a series of medium-sized prints with unusual circular formats in which overt allusions to the Abakuá myth were replaced by more self-referential images.

The final work in the exhibition is the monumental *Resurrection*, referring to the moment an initiate is born into his new life as a member of the Abakuá secret society. Created in 1998, this complex print in nine sheets encapsulates the power of the artist's oeuvre: it tells its stories with mystery and flair but without the need for literal decoding, it offers references to Christianity and to the emotional life of the artist, and it comments on women's rights and gender equality. These

beautiful and poetic works are unparalleled in the history of contemporary printmaking in Cuba. *Nkame*, a word synonymous with “greeting” and “praise” in the language of Abakuá, is a posthumous tribute to the artist as well as a sweeping overview of her artistic career.

Nkame: A Retrospective of Cuban Printmaker Belkis Ayón is funded in part by the Pasadena Art Alliance with additional support from JoAnn and Ronald Busuttil, Carole and Alex Rosenberg, the Shirley and Ralph Shapiro Fund, the Southern California Committee of the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Susan Adelman and Claudio Llanos, Fabio Banegas and Charles Larson, Carolyn Covault, Jay Geller and Lowell Gallagher, Elizabeth and Graeme Gilfillan, Linda Kunik and Rodney Millar, Dallas Price-Van Breda, and The Charitable Foundation.

About Belkis Ayón

Ayón was born in Havana on January 23, 1967, and studied at the prestigious San Alejandro Academy of Fine Arts and then the Higher Institute of Art/Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA), graduating in 1991. Her first solo exhibition in Havana, *Propuesta a los veinte años* (Proposal at the Age of Twenty) took place in 1988. She became a professor of engraving at the San Alejandro Academy and at ISA in 1993, and in the same year she participated in the 16th Venice Biennale and received the international prize at the International Graphics Biennale in Maastricht, Holland. The Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Los Angeles, invited Belkis to participate in the Kwangju Biennial in South Korea in 1997. Subsequently, the Norton Family Foundation, MOCA, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York acquired her works. During the last year of her life, she had four residencies in the U.S. Solo exhibitions include *Desasosiego* (Restlessness), Couturier Gallery, Los Angeles (1998); *Belkis Ayón. Unterstützermich, haltemichhoch, im Schmerz* (Be Supportive of Me, Keep Me Upright in My Pain), Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, Breining, Germany (1995); and *Siempre vuelvo* (I Always Return), Centro Provincial de Artes Plásticas y Diseño, Havana (1993). Her work has been included in numerous group exhibitions and is in museum and private collections worldwide. The artist committed suicide in 1999 at the age of thirty-two.

The Fowler Museum at UCLA is one of the country’s most respected institutions devoted to exploring the arts and cultures of Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and the Americas. The Fowler is open Wed. from noon until 8 p.m., and Thurs. through Sun. from noon to 5 p.m. The museum is closed Mon. and Tues. The Fowler Museum, part of UCLA Arts, is located in the north part of the UCLA campus. Admission is free. Parking is available for a maximum of \$12 in Lot 4. For more information, the public may call 310 825-4361 or visit fowler.ucla.edu.

Selected Related Programs:

Sun., Oct. 2, 2 pm

Cristina Vives and Katia Ayón on Belkis Ayón

Join guest curator Cristina Vives and the artist's sister and director of the Estate of Belkis Ayón, Dr. Katia Ayón, for an opening day gallery tour of *Nkame: A Retrospective of Cuban Printmaker Belkis Ayón*. Vives and Katia Ayón draw upon their personal experiences of the artist and share insights into Belkis Ayón's influence on contemporary Cuban printmaking.

Wed., Oct. 26, 7 pm

Andrew Apter and Judith Bettelheim on *Cuba's Abakuá: African "Origins" and the Work of Belkis Ayón*

These presentations offer an investigation of diverse aspects of Abakuá, the Afro-Cuban fraternal society that inspired Belkis Ayón's art. UCLA Professor of History and Anthropology Andrew Apter will give a talk titled "Abakuá: Ritual, Memory, and Sacred Geography in Cuba and Southeastern Nigeria" and independent art historian and curator Judith Bettelheim will speak about "The Public Face of Abakuá and the Work of Belkis Ayón." A question-and-answer period follows.

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