

STATION

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

NKAME

A RETROSPECTIVE OF CUBAN PRINTMAKER

Belkis Ayón

Opening: Saturday, June 2nd, 2018 at 7PM

The Station Museum of Contemporary Art is pleased to host *Nkame*, a solo exhibition dedicated to the work of the late Cuban printmaker Belkis Ayón (1967-1999), who, 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 Saturday, June 2nd, 2018 at 7PM and runs through September 3rd, 2018. The exhibition presents 47 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 are collaged onto a cardboard matrix and run through a press. Her deliberately austere palette of subtle black, white, and gray, adds drama and mystery to her works, many of which were produced at a 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, the Shirley and Ralph Shapiro Director of the Fowler Museum at the UCLA. "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 of Cuba and Cuban culture, and the historic reopening of diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Cuba."

Ayón's choice of subject matter—the history, mythology, and iconography of Abakuá—was a direction she took in 1985 while still a high school student at the San Alejandro Academy of Fine Arts. 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 while drawing water from the river. She was the first to hear the unexpected and loud bellowing of the fish, the mystical "voice" of Abakuá. 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 was condemned to death. In Ayón's work, Sikán remains alive, and her story and representation figure prominently.

Ayón was born in Havana, Cuba in 1967 and studied at the prestigious San Alejandro Academy of Fine Arts and then the Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA), graduating in 1991. Her first solo exhibition, *Propuesta a los veinte años* (Proposal at the Age of Twenty), took place in Havana in 1988. She became a professor of engraving at the San Alejandro Academy and at ISA in 1993. 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 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. Her solo exhibitions include *Desasosiego* (Restlessness), Couturier Gallery, Los Angeles (1998); *Belkis Ayón. Unterstützernich, 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.

Nkame: A Retrospective of Cuban Printmaker Belkis Ayón was organized by the Estate of Belkis Ayón in cooperation with Dr. Katia Ayón and the Fowler Museum at UCLA, where it premiered in 2016. The exhibition has also been presented at El Museo del Barrio, New York City and the Kemper Museum, Kansas City, Missouri. Upcoming venues include the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, Scottsdale, Arizona; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Santa Fe, New Mexico; The Norton Museum,

STATION

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West Palm Beach, Florida; and the Schnitzer Museum of Art, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon. The museum tour is organized by Landau Traveling Exhibitions, Los Angeles, California.

The Station Museum of Contemporary Art is an exhibition forum for local, national, and international artists, with an emphasis on fine arts that reflects the cultural diversity of Houston's communities. The museum has held comprehensive exhibitions from Mexico, Peru, Venezuela, Colombia, Congo, South Africa, Czech Republic, Austria, Palestine, Iraq, India, Afghanistan, and Russia. As an institution that supports local and Texas art, the Station has organized significant solo exhibitions by Mel Chin, James Drake, Dick Wray, Jesse Lott, George Smith, and group exhibitions that bring Texas artists together with national and international artists.

The Station Museum of Contemporary Art organizes exhibitions that question our society's morality and ethics. It embraces the idea that art plays a critical role in society as an agent of creativity and civil discourse and as a resource that deepens and broadens public awareness of the cultural, political, economic, and personal dimensions of art.

James Harithas, Director
Alan Schnitger, Chief Curator
Joshua Poole, Asst. Director
Alex Tu, Curator
Sophie Asakura, Asst. Curator

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June 2—September 3, 2018