

6-30-2022

Belkis Ayón: Fear, confusion, trance, dignity, and the sublime.

Silvia Márquez Pease

Florida International University, spease@fiu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/art-art-history>



Part of the [Aesthetics Commons](#), [Africana Studies Commons](#), [Art and Design Commons](#), and the [Fine Arts Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Pease, Silvia Márquez, "Belkis Ayón: Fear, confusion, trance, dignity, and the sublime." (2022). *Department of Art and Art History*. 1.

<https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/art-art-history/1>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Communication, Architecture + The Arts at FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Department of Art and Art History by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcc@fiu.edu.

Silvia M. Pease

Belkis Ayón: Fear, confusion, trance, dignity, and the sublime.

“Sikán is the transgressor... I see her and I see myself.” Belkis Ayón

Belkis Ayón, a Cuban artist, takes upon herself to reveal a secret, to be a transgressor. She believes to be the alter ego of the legendary Sikán, a princess who was punished because she shared the secrets of the Abakuá¹² knowledge reserved only for men. Following her steps, Ayón reveals the secrets of the Abakuá in a unique visceral printing and dramatic iconography originating ‘fear and confusion’ among the Cuban community. Yet this fear elicits a sublime dignified emotion caused by the ritualistic act of printing that involves drawing, destruction, inking, destruction, and resolution and her internal repetitive sound of the Mpegó³. The work of Belkis exalts, elevates, inspires, and simultaneously shocks, unsettles, and terrifies. Without a doubt, Ayón’s determination to advance women onwards to the core of the religious power disregards the society’s threats. She continues her ritualistic artistic aim towards the dignity of the oppressed and women, and that by itself, is sublime. How is the sublime defined in Ayón’s artworks?

In this regard, Longinus, *On the Sublime*, in the 1st century, proposes the rhetorical style and the strong emotions elicited by the sublime. Longinus notes that the notion of the sublime is a superhuman emotion that connects us and make us ‘see’ what is incomparably greater than ourselves (*ektasis*).⁴ Very much like Longinus, Edmund Burke questions from a distinct angle on

how to think about the attainment of the sublime. Burke, in his seminal work: *A philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful*, introduces his foundational text on the sublime, linking ‘negative paradoxical affects’ as precursors of the sublime. Philosophers continue to attend to the question of the sublime, such as the contemporary the Bulgarian French philosopher Julia Kristeva, in *Powers of Horror*, that reveals the notion of the ‘abject’ as a conduit to sublimity in “...which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be” (Kristeva POH 10). Kristeva notes an interconnection between the abject, the uncanny, and the sublime. And the notions of boundary, blurring, and destabilization relate to this interconnection. After all, for Kristeva, ‘confusion and fear’ are a result of the disappearance of boundaries and the blurring together of entities. It is at this state of unsettling discomfort, that Kristeva⁵ recognizes the crossroads of the uncanny, the abject, and the sublime. Or when we reach a state of discomfort that is greater than oneself.

In order to think about the affect and emotion of the sublime, I analyze the pictorial representation of the work of Belkis Ayón in her silkscreen “La Cena” (“The Supper”),⁶ to unveil the potentiality for the sublime caused by the interrelation of confusion and fear or what Kristeva addresses as “ a condition of loss of faith in unified rational or religious systems, though unlike them she sees the individual subject's sense of abjection as the basic condition which these systems serve to mask” (Kristeva POH 1137). I argue that the work of Belkis Ayón caters to the possibility of attainable sublimity, not only through Longinus’ proposal, but through paradoxes of confusion and fear. Indeed, Kristeva and Burke respond in different but interrelated ways to this is a state of unsettling discomfort and a sensing of something greater than oneself. And yet, this state of paradoxical affects predicated by confusion, fear, and trance result in obsolete boundaries and entities that blur together without denying the ‘potentiality’ of the achievement

of sublimity. Yet, it may not trigger an immediate sublime emotion, but a possibility for a sublime state of sacred spirituality that is dignified.

First, to bring light to this argument, I draw attention to Longinus and Burke's notions of the sublime. For Longinus, "[T]he Sublime, wherever it occurs, consists in a certain loftiness and excellence of language" (Longinus 3,1). In other words, Longinus is interested in the elocution of the rhetorical. Thus, his concept of the sublime came to be defined in terms of the rhetoric emotions awakened in the experience of a work of art, rather than in the terms of the properties of the artwork. The sublime, for Longinus, makes us feel exalted, joyful, dignified, elevated, ennobled and proud, exhorting grand thoughts and passionate language. It is a rhetorical, not a philosophical concept.

How does the Cuban Abakuá ceremonial chanting accompanied by the symbolic drum of the Mpegó⁷ and the mystic voice of the leopard (Ekue) resonate in Belkis Ayón's work? Is this ritualistic chanting, in an African language, what Longinus considers 'sublime'?

Contrary to Longinus, Burke says that the 'idea' generates the 'sublime,' which is born out of negative effects such as fear and horror. Burke is interested in how the 'idea' is invested in materiality or representation, how the sublime idea projects onto an object. And, in turn, into a rhetoric tradition, because aesthetic concepts come from the rhetoric into the sublime.⁸ The decades that followed, saw the evolution of the sublime as an aesthetic experience. Julia Kristeva proposes that the philosophical aesthetics is ideology, and the sublime is turned into the rhetoric. The sublime is an "...aesthetic judgement and value that vied with others (beauty, wonder, pleasure, pain – in a word, the whole gamut of aesthetics perception)" reorients the relationship between the symbolic order and the semiotic violence (Kristeva POH 141). Burke and Kristeva,

in distinct ways, elucidate to the contradictory relationship of fear and terror as a means of catharsis towards the sublime.

“La Cena” (The Supper).⁹

Deeply rooted in her Cuban heritage, Ayón’s large six-panel work “La Cena,” (“The Supper”), was inspired, as much of her work, by the secret all-male fraternal society of the Abakuá, that originated in the Calabar region of Nigeria, but dates back to the 19th century in Cuba. Abakuá members descend from the leopard societies and represent a curious phenomenon of black Masonry and a “...complex tangle of religious survivals preceding from distant cultures” (Henken 203). Belkis Ayón’s large image blends elements of the Last Supper (Christianity) with the initiation banquet (Iriampó)¹⁰ of the Abakuá. In “La Cena,” the main figures are women violating the secret society’s rules. They are talking, whispering, and staring.



Figure 1. Ayón, Belkis. “La cena” (“The Supper”), 1991. Fowler Museum at UCLA

Belkis Ayón believed to be the alter ego of Sikán who comes to live in her art as a bright powerful female image. Ayón notes that “Sikán’s image is paramount in all these works because, like myself, she led and leads –through me-, a disquieting life, looking insistently for a way out”

(Belkis Ayón, January 1998). The truth is that the Princess Sikán, a woman who learned the secrets of Tanze, a sacred fish of the river, was the first interpreter of the Abakuá knowledge, and was killed for sharing the secrets. Just like Aristotele's purgative power of tragedy, the tragic hero must neither be a villain nor a virtuous man but a 'character' between these two extremes, a man (in this case a woman) who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by "bice or depravity, but by some error or frailty" (Aristoteles 24-25). The reaction of the audience will also be ambiguous exciting emotions of 'pity and fear.' Ayón is the hero of this tragedy, who leaving aside the fear, attempts to position women in the role of the saviors, sacrificing her own life. But the goal of the tragedy is not the suffering but the knowledges that it originates. Ayón identifies with the tragic plot of Sikan and re-creates her tragedy with a twist, she writes: "Sikán is the transgressor... I see her and I see myself" (Belkis Ayón). Aristoteles' purifying virtuous 'end of the tragedy,' asserts that the tragedy is an imitation [mimesis] of an action that is serious, complete, and of certain magnitude, through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions" (Aristoteles xiii). In Belkis Ayon's example, the tragic catharsis brings about a sudden reversal of 'misfortunes,' from misery and fear to dignity and the sublime.

The process.

Ayón's bold printing experimentation and religious iconography refocuses the male-dominated religious narrative of the Abakuá and Christianity. Dramatic black, white, and grey prints using a reverse impression of the matrix create raised surfaces and grooves to trap the ink that included "... a rich tapestry of crackles and swirls, floral patterns, circular and geometric shapes, along with human and animal forms. All were layered on top of an enigmatic, storied narrative brimming with crosses, halos, and other religious iconography, as well as art history

references” (Vankin, Los Angeles Times). Belkis Ayón describes her technique by saying: “My images are realized in the form of collography, an engraving technique that consists of a type of printed collage formed from a wide variety of materials arranged and pasted on a cardboard support” (Belkis Ayon). It is this intensity in style that Kristeva describes as “...the unbearable identity of the narrator and of the surroundings that are supposed to sustain [him] her can no longer be narrated but cries out or is described with maximal stylistic intensity (language of violence, of obscenity, or of a rhetoric that relates the text to poetry)” (Kristeva,141). In a desperate search to dignify the ‘female identity’, Ayón ‘maximizes’ the surface of her oversized collographic print by gluing palm leaves and seaweed, among other found materials, onto cardboard, creating striking contrasts of hue and texture. There is a ‘language of violence’ in the process of printing “...over parts of the matrix to create raised surfaces and carved into other areas, creating grooves to trap the ink. Then she ran the matrix and paper through a hand-cranked printing press” (Vankin, Los Angeles Times). Thus, the artist draws, destroys the drawing with the ink, and printing. It is a ritual, a process or maybe a trance inspired by the ritualistic music of the Abakuá.

The icons.

Belkis Ayon writes: “I incorporate into my work personalities like the Leopard Man, a figure identified with imposing power and aggression- a “macho” who sacrificed Sikán, the woman who discovered the secret of Abakuá and dies at the hands of the men at the altar so that the secret would remain among them and not disappear” (Belkis Ayon). As Kristeva puts it, the “incandescent states of a boundary-subjectivity ... called abjection, is the crying-out theme of suffering horror” (Kristeva,141). Ayón’s ‘suffering horror’ is her own death after completing the series of prints revealing Sikán’s secrets, Kristeva’s abject description coincides with what Katia

Ayón Manso, Belkis' sister noted: "The work is powerful but can be scary too." It is this blurred subjectivity where "[E]verything is already contained in the Journey: suffering, horror, death, complicitous sarcasm, abjection, fear. And the pit where what speaks is a strange rent between an ego and an the other— between nothing and all" (Kristeva,141). Ayon's depiction of the facial features, especially the ocular vocabulary¹¹ of reducing the eyes to a flat shape containing the pupil as a black circle, produces a *mélange* of human emotions. The eyes are fearful, commanding, unsettled, with an emotional urgency of oppressive circumstances.



Figure 2. Ayón, Belkis. *Closeup* of "La cena" ("The Supper"), 1991. Fowler Museum at UCLA

In conclusion, this is a story of distress, fear, secrets, and death. It is an Aristotelian tragedy that leads to catharsis. The art of Belkis Ayón depicts something intimidating, fearful, and horrifying at times, yet it can be so right and sublime. The intensity of a woman artist that creates a dignified place for another woman in Cuba is sublime. Dignity is sublime. As Longinus

points out, the harmony of words in a persuasive composition could excite the soul and along with diction creates dignity and sublimity. Through Longinus, the words of Ayón: “I am interested above all in questioning everything human, that fleeting feeling, the spiritual” is sublime. Ayón is referring to the attainment of dignified sublimity, she is “the observer, the mediator and the tale teller,” she feels, chants, creates, fear, transgress. In her own words: “I invent the images based on my studies and my experiences, since I am not a believer, and as I see her, I see myself” (Belkis Ayón). This existential self-reflection is a possibility for dignify sublimity and the acceptance of the oppressive and fearful only-men religious society in Cuba of what Burke deem as a paradoxical effect of fear and confusion. Or what Kristeva clearly notes as the abject, a “violent, quasi-mystical permanence” that “raises from the level of political or even social contingency (where it would be due to oppression) to another level; fear becomes a token of humanity, that is, of an appeal to love” (Kristeva, 142). These emotions, depicted in Ayón’s work, which contest marginality and censorship of extremely sensitive topics given the severe political and economic crises Cuba faced following the dissolution of Eastern European socialism in 1991, represent the paradox that Burke and Kristeva propose, in interrelated ways. There is no doubt of the dignified intention of Belkis Ayón insistence on synthesizing Abakuá practices with Christian imagery to promote women to the power of knowledge.

Perhaps from our position, as artist philosophers, in which we observe the tragic life and death of Belkis Ayón and her magnificent legacy of work,¹² it is of our interest to contemplate, identify, and contest women’s dignity. Even though this aesthetic contestation might seem to be fearful and horrific, at times it is not. Ultimately, it will exalt us, moving us forward to the attainment of the sublime.



Figure 3. Belkis Ayón at the Havana Galerie, Zurich, Aug. 23, 1999. Fowler Museum at UCLA



Figure 4. Installation view, *Nkame: A Retrospective of Cuban Printmaker Belkis Ayón*, October 2, 2016–February 12, 2017, Fowler Museum at UCLA (photo © Reed Hutchinson)

Works Cited

Aristotle. *Poetics*. Trans. Malcolm Heath, London: Penguin, 1997. ISBN-10: 0140446362, ISBN-13: 9780140446364 (PDF)

Ayón, Belkis. www.ayonbelkis.cult.cu/en/home/. Accessed 10/24/20

Badajoz, Joaquín. *La Opinion*. “Belkis Ayón: La maldición de Sikán.” laopinion.com/2017/09/06/belkis-ayon-la-maldicion-de-sikan/. Accessed 10/24/20

Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Inquiry into Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. Edited by Adam Phillips, Oxford World’s Classics, 2009. ISBN-10: 0199537887, ISBN-13: 978-0199537884

Gerwin, Daniel. *Hyperallergic*. “The Masterful, Unsettling Work of a Female Cuban Printmaker.” hyperallergic.com/346366/the-masterful-unsettling-work-of-a-female-cuban-printmaker/. Accessed 10/23/20

Henken, Ted. *Mirian Selaya, Dimas Castellanos. Latin America in Focus. Cuba. ABC Clio, 2013.*

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of terror. An Essay on abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York, Columbia University Press, 1982.

Longinus. *On the Sublime*. Trans. Penelope Murray, T.S. Dorsch. *Classical Literary Criticism*. London: Penguin, 2004. 113-166. Print. ISBN-13: 9780140446517

Longinus. *On the Sublime*. Translated by H. L. Havell, Macmillan, 1890. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/17957/17957-h/17957-h.htm>

Vankin, Deborah, the late Cuban artist Belkis Ayón’s mysterious world unfurls at the Fowler Museum, *Los Angeles Times*. www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-ca-cm-belkis-ayon-20160912-snap-htmlstory.html. Accessed Oct. 19th, 2020.

Notes

¹ ‘Abakuá,’ sometimes known as Nañigo, is an Afro-Cuban men's initiatory fraternity or secret society, which originated from fraternal associations in the Cross-River region of southeastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abaku%C3%A1>. Accessed 10/20/20.

² ‘Abakuá’ Henken, Ted. Mirian Selaya, Dimas Castellanos. *Latin America in Focus. Cuba.ABC Clio*, 2013. Pgs. 571,403,203,459.

³ In Cuba, Abakuá music is ceremonial. “Each step of an Abakuá ceremony - whether an initiation or a funeral - is accompanied by music, consisting of chants by a lead voice and chorus performed either a cappella, or to the accompaniment of a percussion ensemble (with drums, rattles, and a metal bell). Other facets of Abakuá ceremony are accompanied by ritual sounds: a symbolic drum called ‘Mpegó’ is hit four times to call the group to order (1); an iron bell called ‘Ekón’ is hit with a stick in order to communicate with ‘Ékue’ - the mystic Voice of the leopard - in the sacred forest in order to evoke its presence inside the temple; the resonant sound of the mystic Voice authorizes the ceremonial process of initiations and funerals; the metal bells worn around the waists of the ‘Íreme’ body-maskers are shaken to frighten-off negative spirits in the ceremonial space; a title-holder called Moruá Yuánsa shakes ‘Erikúnde’ rattles in his hands in order to communicate with and guide the Íremes into action.” www.lameca.org/publications-numeriques/dossiers-et-articles/cuban-abakua-music/3-abakua-ceremonial-music/. Accessed 10/6/20.

⁴ Ektasis, Greek word meaning to stand outside of oneself.

⁵ Julia Kristeva, Sigmund Freud and Immanuel Kant explore the concept of the unsettling discomfort and a sensing of something greater than oneself in different but interrelated ways.

⁶ Figure. 1. Ayon, Belkis. "La cena" ("The Supper"), 1991. Fowler Museum at UCLA

⁷ Abakuá Ceremonial Music. www.lameca.org/publications-numeriques/dossiers-et-articles/cuban-abakua-music/3-abakua-ceremonial-music/. Accessed 10/26/20

⁸ On a side note, eventually Kant will take it a step further distinguishing the remarkable differences between the sublime and the beautiful, affirming that the sublime is “to be found in a formless object” represented by a “boundlessness” (Kant CJ § 23). Thus, this concept belongs to ‘Reason,’ and it “...shows a faculty of the mind surpassing every standard of Sense” (Kant CJ § 25).

⁹ Figure. 1. Ayon, Belkis. “La cena” (“The Supper”), 1991. Fowler Museum at UCLA

¹⁰ ‘iriampo’ African-derived colloquial words for “food.” Henken, Ted. Mirian Selaya, Dimas Castellanos. *Latin America in Focus. Cuba.ABC Clio*, 2013.

¹¹ See Figure 2. Ayón, Belkis. Closeup of “La cena” (“The Supper”), 1991. Fowler Museum at UCLA

¹² See Figure 4. Installation view, *Nkame: A Retrospective of Cuban Printmaker Belkis Ayón*, October 2, 2016–February 12, 2017, Fowler Museum at UCLA (photo © Reed Hutchinson)