

Feminist

representation and iconographic and social significance in the artistic work of Belkis Ayón

Representación feminista y significación iconográfica y social en la obra artística de Belkis Ayón

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to make an assessment of the iconographic and social significance of Belkis Ayón's artistic work from the feminist representation -which exhibits the stereotypes of the female body and Afro-Cuban religiosity-. For its content, a brief exploration of feminist art and its social impact was carried out, in addition to the evaluation of the works of some of its main exponents. The results allowed the identification of core of value such as: Feminism as a worldwide movement for women's liberation, its stereotypes in feminist art, and the challenges of women artists in the face of the modern world and the challenges facing artists in the modern world. We highlight Ayón's work, from a productive speech of the visual arts.

Keywords:

Feminist representation, Iconographic and social significance, Afro-Cuban religiosity, Belkis Ayón.

RESUMEN

El propósito de este artículo es realizar una valoración sobre la significación iconográfica y social en la obra artística de Belkis Ayón desde la representación feminista –la que exhibe los estereotipos del cuerpo femenino y la religiosidad afrocubana-. Para su contenido se realizó una breve exploración acerca del arte feminista y su impacto social, además de la evaluación de las obras de algunos de sus principales exponentes. Los resultados permitieron identificar núcleos de valor como: El feminismo como movimiento mundial por la liberación de la mujer, sus estereotipos en el arte feminista, y los desafíos de las artistas ante el mundo moderno. Destacamos la obra de Ayón, a partir de un discurso productivo de las artes visuales.

Palabras clave:

Representación feminista, Significación iconográfica y social, Religiosidad afrocubana, Belkis Ayón.

INTRODUCTION

Feminist art is a category of art associated with feminism that proliferated in the 1960s and 1970s. This movement was inspired by student protests, second wave feminism and the civil rights movement. Women artists used their artwork in the form of protests to shed light on the inequalities of the world.

This movement, too, set out to create new meanings and re-symbolize metaphors, for which it is necessary to find someone who did not participate in the creation of patriarchal logic. Thus, women, their feelings, their ways of life, their bodies and the language that emanates from them, have always been on the margins of this logic. They have been placed on the frontier of the rational.

Although throughout history there have been several revolutionary artistic movements, the feminist art movement is different from those because it deals with women's roles in society and in the private sphere. Feminist art is a form of expression closely related to the artist's experience, her awareness of her womanhood and her experience of it, which is expressed through her work.

The first feminist artists realize that there are no answers to the question "Who am I?" outside the frame of reference of their gender. Thus, the question "who are we?" arises, understanding that only through the exploration of collective circumstances can they come to understand themselves as human beings. That is why collaborative art and performance were predominantly feminist forms during the 70s and 80s of the 20th century, forms that refer to an attempt to transcend the individual sphere.

Visual artists of the stature of Yayoi Kusama, Yoko Ono, Judy Chicago, Judith Blak, Hannah Wilke and Cuban Ana Mendieta turned creation into a hammer that criticized the totalitarian impulses of the patriarchal system, showing how useless, impractical and impoverishing it is to maintain a single theoretical discourse, turning women into creators and not into inspirational muses or sexual objects to be represented in the arts.

In this way, feminist artists, by questioning patriarchy and its values of modernism, freely experimented with an art that is not limited by traditional media or aesthetic concepts. They use both traditional media, such as painting and drawing, and non-traditional media, plastic actions, mail art, as well as media not even considered as such, such as parties, contests and mass media events.

Feminist art can be in any medium or language, although in recent years there has been an exponential development of video and digital art that corresponds to the times humanity is living today with the proliferation of new technologies.

In feminist artists, it is up to the woman herself to redefine herself as a subject. They begin to be aware of the artificiality and repressive power of what was called "the social construction of gender". Thus, the artists set out to discover an "I" that, despite the social imposition of a role that has lasted practically all of human history, is an authentic voice

that can serve as the basis for a new and "liberated" construction of feminine identity. From its beginnings, feminist art was marked by the search for the construction of identity.

Feminism in art has not cleansed the ideology that exists within the core of this and its markets, is that the male gender takes the baton of the action, although this is not only particular to art, it has helped and extended the panorama of women within it, seeking through art equality.

In Cuba, the gender approach is not a new phenomenon. The country has had a feminist tradition for more than a century. Although history goes further back in time if we talk about great nineteenth-century Cuban women writers who, since then, were already beginning to assert their work in a patriarchal society.

Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda and Ana Betancourt are reliable examples of this. The analyses also include a great number of women who, from the visual arts, became paradigms of plastic creation. And even when the main objective of their work was not to show a radical feminist stance, they were transgressors like the visual artist Amelia Peláez.

Today many Cuban women artists recognize the feminism of their works, (others do not) although the intention has not been marked during the creation process. They reflect in painting, engraving, photography, performance or videos, parts of their bodies, everyday situations, objects that surround them and all this is part of their identities that coincided with an international movement that had much to do with multiculturalism and feminist movements. The artists Antonia Eiriz and Belkis Ayón are clear exponents of this.

This generation was part of a broader movement that included both women and men artists; the so-called Classic Movement of the 80's or Cuban Renaissance. They made contributions from their subjective feminine point of view. Of national and foreign there is half and half because these creators were part of a generation whose assumptions focused on the updating of artistic languages, on the inquiry into the popular, the identity and the multicultural.

From these ideas, this article highlights the importance of these movements with a look at the nineties of the twentieth century, focusing on the work of the artist Belkis Ayón. It highlights her artistic work, which implies an understanding of art as a phenomenon that goes beyond the plastic projection, as a sign that concerns culture in general.

This research is directed to the question: what significance can be derived from the study of feminist representation in the work of Belkis Ayón?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodology used in this work was analytical-descriptive and explanatory. The state and characteristics of Belkis Ayón's artistic work are described, from its iconographic and social significance. This work is developed in a productive discourse of the visual arts in tune with the stereotypes of the female body and Afro-Cuban religiosity.

It is an article of an inductive-deductive nature: Induction facilitated the arrival at generalizations based on the characterization of feminist representation in the current social context. Deduction determined the general elements within the specific, to arrive at conclusions. This method was necessary in the formulation of the ideas associated with the analysis of the referents on feminism as a global movement for women's liberation, its stereotypes in feminist art, and the challenges of artists in today's world.

In this sense, the content analysis of some of the written sources determined for the presented study and the representation of the main terms linked to it, were used. Based on such conceptual selection, the following terms were enunciated: feminist representation, iconographic and social significance, and Afro-Cuban religiosity.

RESULTS-DISCUSSION

Feminism and its relation to the visual arts

Feminism has always existed and can be stated in different senses. In the broadest sense of the term, whenever women, individually or collectively, have complained about their unjust and bitter fate under patriarchy and have demanded a different situation, a better life.

In the history of mankind, it has been difficult for women to function in society, which has always been dominated by the supremacy of men, based above all on the use of force and later on their supposed intellectual superiority.

In Roman law, of Western society, the wife was a 'possession' of the husband and, as such, had no legal control over her person, her resources or her children. According to a double standard, respectable women had to be chaste and faithful, unlike men, to whom no such demands were made. In the Middle Ages, feudal legislation, land was inherited through the male line and implied political power, further favoring the subordination of women.

It is not difficult to suppose then that such domination could last a lifetime, and while exploitation was passed from generation to generation, so was the desire for freedom, equality, which led women to understand that united in a single movement they could really make a difference.

Feminism

Feminism was born in Europe at the end of the 18th century as a movement for the liberation of women. Its demands have changed over time. One of the main and first achievements was to obtain women's suffrage, for which the suffragette movement, born in Great Britain, fought.

The birth and development of feminism has made society aware of the situation of discrimination in which women lived and took measures such as the modification and creation of new laws (civil and criminal codes that do not subordinate their rights), economic equality (receiving the same salary as a man with an identical job) and labor equality (access to decision-making areas), adding to this that today there are still important challenges, such as divorce and abortion

laws in countries that still do not have regulations in this regard.

These requirements led to the appearance, in the 1980s, of positive discrimination policies, which establish quotas for women in all areas of social life, aimed at correcting in practice the traditional discrimination against women.

Feminism denies the premise of male superiority over women in both the professional and personal spheres, stating that this idea arises from a wide range of stereotypes and beliefs that sustain male domination and are strongly rooted in the social structure; they do not arise, therefore, from true physical or intellectual superiority.

On the other hand, feminist discourse, by developing a global critique of patriarchal society, defends new values associated with femininity in order to propose a substantive change in the forms of social organization and relationships.

This is why women, through political organizations, wrote and proposed a concrete response to the family, labor and social problems to which they had been subjected for centuries. Different paths were chosen by women to develop their enterprise, among which the visual arts stand out.

The feminist slogan "the personal is political" is taken up by Feminist Art, it works with the personal sphere of women's lives and turns every aspect of private life into a political experience. For the philosopher Bartra (2015) apolitical art does not exist. She refers that feminist art is a creation, voluntary or instinctive, with a political content different from others and therefore confronts with values of the dominant ideology.

Within the most "liberal" societies there are recognizable differences between the treatment of women according to their ethnicity, social class, religion or sexual orientation. As a result, many strands of feminism have emerged that seek to vindicate all the scenarios of struggle that women must face in order to become fully free. Among the many current feminist movements, we can mention the following: Philosophical Feminism, Liberal Feminism, Equality Feminism, Difference Feminism, Socialist Feminism.

There are also other better-known ideological currents such as radical feminism and eco feminism, the latter showing encouraging results in favor of nature and women using the arts as an inspirational vehicle. Bartra (2015) considers ecofeminism to be a movement that seeks a connection between exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination-oppression of women.

It emerged in the mid-1970s within the second wave of feminism and the green movement. Ecofeminism brings together elements of the feminist and green movements, and at the same time represents a challenge to both.

Stereotypes

Many of these movements have their own objectives according to the point of interest of their members, but a common denominator among their lines of work or expression is

undoubtedly the rebellion against stereotypes and dogmas to which women have also been subjected.

Stereotypes are ideas or expressions, stereotyped models of qualities or behaviors. They perpetuate the roles that society has conferred on women, for example: virgins, mothers, goddesses, prostitutes, femmes fatales and victims.

Through art and its constructions, men had and still have the power to create the imagined woman, thus conceiving the femininity that is the image of their most intimate desires and their most hidden fears. Representations of the female body have been constant throughout the artistic periods.

In the first female representations in the Paleolithic, women are represented through a certain symbolism that shows from simple vulvae or claviform figures to more complex ones such as silhouettes or contours of the female profile. They are around 35,000 to 30,000 years old.

At the end of this period, women began to work and cultivate the land, being called by some authors as "matriarchy" represented as "mother earth" or "goddess of the Neolithic". These sculptures were dedicated to the figure of the woman in a kind of homage to her person and symbolism as fertile mother of nature.

However, the way of representing her has varied as society changed. Thus, the representation of the female body in art and how women have gone from being mere objects of artistic representation to creative subjects has also changed.

The female image is one of the most frequent themes throughout the history of art within the Western tradition; the woman is more painted than painter and the images that bring us those stereotypes that perpetuate the roles that society has assigned to women.

There are multiple representations or masculine visions of women and femininity through the representations of the goddesses of fertility or beauty (Venus and Aphrodite), several of the Greco-Roman Olympian, models of erotic myths and nudes of virgins.

For Pollock (2013) y Bartra (2015) women have been an object for figurative artists, painters, writers and sculptors, but it does not mean something positive for them. To these artists, mostly male, women have been a concern mainly as beautiful objects. To this is added the beauty that entails a trap, because this led to the objectification of women and, on the other hand, to insist that the main quality they should possess is beauty. All this favored the survival of patriarchy.

In the media, in magazines or in our urban environment and especially in large cities abroad or foreign sources of information, we are surrounded by advertising images that try to convince us by showing generic body models with which men and women have been identified, although in a greater proportion of the latter.

The female body has been used as a function of others, for the pleasure of others, based on figures such as imposed maternity; sexuality (but not a sexuality for itself); and unreal and unhealthy beauty patterns, all as unquestionable mandates. Therefore, it is a marked body that is required

to comply with structured and extremely harmful standards for women.

Art and feminism

The literature consulted on this denomination (Pollock, 2013; Bartra, 2015; Malatino 2021; Pastor, 2021; Díaz Zepeda, 2022 y Peña-Fernández et al., 2023), refers us to determine how art as an expression of feminine feelings and with its powerful power to approach human beings became undoubtedly one of its main weapons in recent times. Feminist art coincides with a value system, a way of life, a strategy for change.

The most significant characteristic of feminist art is its political function. Within this, its vision for change, its effort to make women's voices heard, seldom considered in our culture, to express their vision of the world.

The artists are interested in participating actively in the field of culture, they share the idea of transforming the conditions in which women's lives have developed; they also try to recover their own history by using art as another instrument within the strategies of the feminist movement.

Feminist art is a category of art associated with feminism, proliferating in the decades of the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century, at which stage it begins to recognize the role of women as artists and to investigate past eras in which many artists were forgotten. This is the stage where there is a great rupture in terms of the role of women.

The movement was inspired by student protests, second wave feminism and the civil rights movement. Women artists used their artwork in the form of protests to shed light on the inequalities of the world.

The history of feminist art as a discipline has shown that there are other parameters for making historical evaluations and critical judgments of art made by women and men, without the need to resort to the androcentric tools of analysis that had been traditionally used. Traditions that established a difference between art made by men and art produced by women, based on biological criteria.

From another perspective, it is proposed to create new meanings and re-symbolize metaphors, for which it is necessary to find someone who has not participated in the creation of patriarchal logic. And who has always been on the margin of it, who has been placed on the border of the rational? Women, their feelings, their ways of life, their bodies and the language that emanates from them.

Women's work was rather a victim of their incomprehension and of men's own ignorance and narrow vision, which is why many women artists have been victims of rejection and of their own physical and emotional violence. For these reasons, one of the paths chosen by women artists is the artistic reinterpretation of their bodies.

The representation of the female nude has become emblematic for feminist art: A look at a selection of works produced by women from the 1970s to the 1990s shows how developments within the women's movement have been articulated

in terms of a politics of identity and the body through the formulation of new strategies and cultural interventions.

Many artists attempt to present a new reading of the female body, incorporating the biological and the experience of women's bodies, sometimes with tearing and pain, but also with ironic distancing and humor. Examples of these creators are: Frida Kahlo, Leonora Carrington or Remedios Varo. The objective of their images is to exalt the sensual difference and affirm the otherness of women, replacing the connotations of feminine inferiority with pride in women's bodies and minds.

In Frida's case, not only did she stand out, but she opened a path for all those women who were sure of themselves and their talent, her work has been tremendously prolific and broke with the stereotypes of the time. She decided to create her image as if it were a work of art, and she wanted to focus it on the struggle for equality. She masculinized her appearance, allowing and accepting facial hair, and forgot about gender stereotypes, which were so prevalent at the time.

For feminist movements, the artist is a symbol of example and rebellion, her works gave prominence to women repressed and subjected to the imposed behaviors of the time. Likewise, she alluded openly to her sexual desires, the liberation of her gender, the treatment of taboos around menstruation, maternity and abortion.

Pollock (2013), since 1977, had already denounced what she called "vaginal iconography", which tended to reduce the multiple feminine identities to a supposedly stable signifier, derived from their biological bodies. Against a univocal image, Pollock (2013), who is surely today the most influential name in feminist art historiography, proposed a deconstruction of feminine images, a critique of stabilizing discourses, in short, of all kinds of reductions, including those operated by feminism.

From the 1980s onwards, it can be said, roughly speaking, that the feminism of "equality" gave way to that of difference. For the field of postcolonial literary criticism, it is important to note that the need to move from a merely "oppositional" feminism to a "critical" feminism, capable of examining the way in which feminism itself is imbricated in institutions and ideologies, was highlighted.

Other factors that have weakened the work of female creators have been the problems or impediments for them to find appropriate venues to exhibit their works of art. Throughout history, social and institutional factors have been responsible for the fact that such talent has been held back, in addition to being frankly silenced. This denotes a situation of inequality and injustice for women artists.

This reaffirms that the patriarchal system goes beyond gender discrimination and also other factors such as social class and race are ridiculously oppressive and discouraging for anyone who was not born white, preferably middle class and, above all, male and heterosexual.

In the case of Yoko Ono, she ventured into the plastic arts, writing, films and drawing, in addition to music, with which she dealt with themes such as freedom of thought, peace, the fight against racism, homophobia and sexism, and the appreciation of small everyday sensations.

Another outstanding example within this group is the American painter, writer, educator and feminist art pioneer Judy Chicago, who was recognized for her large art installation pieces. Her most outstanding work is "The Dinner Party" in which she celebrates the achievements of women throughout history and is considered the first epic feminist work.

Last but not least, we have the case of Cuban Ana Mendieta, who is one of the most recognized Hispanic artists in Contemporary Art. She is a Cuban exile in the United States who dedicated her work to developing movements such as performance and Body Art, tendencies that led her to express herself in unconventional ways. Critics and colleagues of the artist have pointed out that Mendieta combined all these possibilities with her feminist concerns and her interest in her own roots.

Her body was her tool, the channel through which her experiences, opinions and concerns, along with her fragmented transcendent Abakúacrutable arginalization-as a woman and as a Cuban exile-sprouted into the light. A sensitive and intimate artist, at the same time transcendent, whose work had a complex development due to the influence of elements with very diverse origins, who saw her intense artistic -and also personal- career cut short at the age of 36 when she fell from the window of her apartment.

In the aforementioned examples we can see the commitment of the woman with the time in which she develops, sometimes fighting against the current, which does not weaken her work, on the contrary, it grows, even dealing with themes that go beyond women's rights. On this point, Bartra (2015) considers that there is a feminine art that differs from the masculine one because the place that women occupy in society provides them with a different vision.

Bartra (2015) proposes to analyze the constants in female creation to show its specificity and points out a twofold path: first, to analyze the socio-historical conditions of women in general, and of women who produce art in particular; and, second, to analyze the constants within creation itself, namely, the form of expression and language (form and content).

Thus, feminist artists, by questioning patriarchy and its values of modernism, freely venture into an art that is not limited by traditional media or aesthetic concepts. They use both traditional media, painting, drawing, and non-traditional media, plastic actions, mail art, as well as media not even considered as such, parties, contests, mass media events.

Female art can be in any medium or language, although in recent years there has been an exponential development of

video and digital art, which corresponds to the times we are living in, with the proliferation of new technologies.

Another conclusion reached by feminist artists is that it is up to women themselves to redefine themselves as subjects. They begin to become aware of the artificiality and repressive power of what was called “the social construction of gender”. Thus the artists set out to discover an “I” that, despite the social imposition of a role that has lasted throughout human history, is an authentic voice that can serve as a new and “liberated” construction of feminine identity. From the beginning, feminist art was marked by the construction of identity.

Feminism in art has not cleansed the ideology that exists within the core of art and its markets, which is that the male gender carries the action, although this is not only particular to art, although it has helped and extended the panorama of women within it, seeking through art, equality especially in the way the world sees women.

At present -just to cite a few examples- there are several studies on feminism in general, from social and cultural perspectives, and from art and feminism, in particular. These studies characterize the state of the art in communicational experiences linked to digital culture and networks, (Díaz Zepeda, 2022; Peña-Fernández et al. 2023), and to the representations of Snow White in animated films, (López-González et al., 2023).

We also highlight Pastor (2021) with the study on families in Almodovar's films, those that are formed accidentally or by necessity, regardless of gender, sexuality, fertility, age or class, with the figure of the “Mother” being a unifying force.

There are appealing studies such as Feminism, gender identity and polarization in TikTok and Twitter, by Peña-Fernández et al. (2023), information associated with Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminism, which is also known by its acronym “TERF” (Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist).

This is one of the terms with the greatest expansion in the context of today's digital feminist debate. Its first uses date back to 2008 and currently, its presence is very common in digital conversations in networks such as Twitter. In this sense, according to Malatino (2021), feminists classified as “TERF” perceive this term as something negative and even as an insult.

Proposals on the presence of women, the feminine and the feminist from the perspective of the visual arts and literature are also nuanced. The works of López Gregoris, (2022), with the text “Mujer y violencia en el teatro antiguo”. Archetypes of Greece and Rome; and by Mitjans Altarriba, (2017) “La construcción de la identidad femenina en la pintura de Madeline von Foerster”.

In the visual arts, Balzi Costa (2021) presents an investigation that exposes the structure of a pattern of objectification of the female body that responds to capitalist policies using visual culture and art history as a medium from the sixteenth to the twenty-first centuries. From the collection and analysis of the works of artists, art directors, photographers, film

directors and video game designers, a visual archive was created in digital format.

The studies on the translatology of the genre are significant. We highlight Villanueva Jordán and Molines Galarza (2022), and Rodríguez Arcos, (2022). The latter, in Post-translations of identity and the body in instructive texts in the advertising environment: the case of lily cup, exhibits from an overview of Translatology, the study of the body as a surface of reading and rewriting, molded through different discourses.

We would also like to emphasize Ibáñez Castejón (2023) with the work “Repensando el retrato sobre las mujeres del Sur al calor de la cuarta ola feminista”. The case of Oxfam Intermón, which shows how development NGOs (NGDOs) have adopted communicative guidelines with the aim of improving the image they offer of the citizens of the countries of the South, paying specific attention to women.

According to Ibáñez Castejón (2023), several studies have shown that organizations have not been able to transcend the victimized and dependent image they have tended to offer, nor the gender roles traditionally associated with the female population. For its part, the fourth feminist wave has raised new debates and questions that invite NGDOs to rethink the way they treat female figures in their messages.

And, precisely, the fourth wave of feminism in Spain, Germany and Ireland has been marked by the cases of “La Manada”, Kölner Silvesternacht and The Lacy Thong on sexual crimes. Their historic sentences have been the subject of heated debates in the media and have made two important fractures visible: first, between EU society and the judicial system, and second, between the different legal cultures of the member countries.

This is research by Castillo Bernal and Rodríguez Muñoz (2022): The translation of sexual offenses in Europe: a comparative of sentences from Spain, Germany and Ireland, which deserves attention in current times.

In Cuba there has been a feminist tradition for more than a century. Although history goes further back in time, if we talk about great women writers such as Gertrudis Gomez de Avellaneda from Camagüey, who already in the 18th century began to assert her work in a patriarchal society. Ana Betancourt is another clear example of this when, in the Guáimaro Assembly, she defended the right of women to be recognized as equals and to be allowed to fight for the freedom of their homeland.

It also includes a number of women who, from the visual arts, became paradigms of plastic creation. And even when the main objective of their works was not to show a radical feminist stance, they were transgressors like the artist Amelia Peláez.

The history of Cuba records feminism as a reformist movement, to the extent that it focused its interest in obtaining suffrage for women who were still subjects within the Republic. The women's congresses also focused their objectives on the right to vote and the denunciation of administrative corruption due to personalism and caudillismo.

With the passing of the Republic, artists began to emerge who challenged a world that, although it promoted creative freedom, continued to be stigmatized by gender inequalities. Notable are the cases of Amelia Peláez (1896-1968), Mirta Cerra (1904-1986), Lesbia Vent Dumois (1932) and Antonia Eiriz (1930-1995), and from the sixties of the twentieth century, figures like Flora Fong (1949), Zaida del Río (1954) or Ileana Mulet (1952), who found in art a way to express not only their Cuban identity but also their femininity.

Today many Cuban women artists recognize the feminism of their works, although the intention has not been marked during the creative process. They reflect in painting, engraving, photography, performance or videos, parts of their bodies, everyday situations, objects that surround them, and all this is part of their identities, which has coincided with an international movement that had much to do with multiculturalism and feminist movements. Belkis Ayón is a clear exponent of this expression.

Feminist representation in Belkis Ayón's work

Belkis Ayón Manso (Cuba, 1967-1999), (figure 1). Born in Havana on January 23 and died on September 11. She graduated from the Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA) in Havana and before that, from the San Alejandro Provincial School of Plastic Arts in the same city. She served as vice-president of the Association of Plastic Artists of the Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba (UNEAC). Throughout her career she was curator of several exhibitions and professor of engraving, collagraphy and intaglio.

Fig. 1: Belkis Ayón



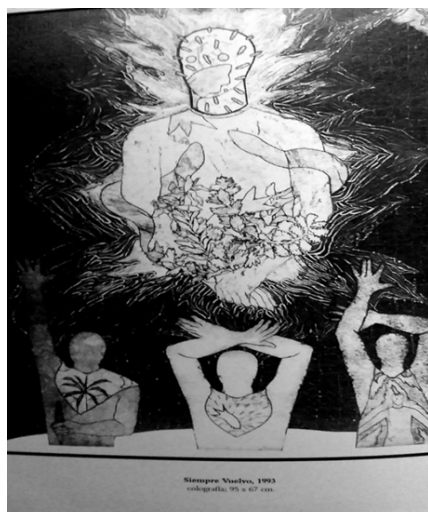
She participated in several personal and collective exhibitions in Switzerland, Japan, United States, Germany, Italy, Canada, Spain, Russia, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Colombia, Holland and Cuba, among other countries. Belkis Ayón Manso (Cuba, 1967-1999).

She has received numerous distinctions and awards. Among them it is worth mentioning that of Artist in Residence/lecturer/instructor, The Tyler School of Art, Temple University Printmaking Department; Distinction for National Culture, from the Cuban Council of State and the First Prize in the

1e. Internationale Grafiek Biennale, Maastricht, Holland, in 1996.

In an examination of Belkis Ayón's work, we are struck by the attributes that propitiate the encounter with worlds of silence and mystery, (figure 2). Wood (1999), in her analysis, highlights the creation of a personal and unmistakable universe, characterized by multiple ethnocultural indications of gender and ancestry. And in this he calls attention to what could be thought that the black and white were premonitory of a state of restlessness that would culminate in a disaster.

Fig 2: Always Return, 1993



Her work, full of transfigurations and intertwining associated with visuality, is confirmed in the words of Wood (1999) when she affirms:

In his works the transfigurations are one of the most significant inconsequential elements. Everything came from the permanent play with the matrices and with the marked bodies. The mutation constitutes one of the revealing qualities of the unprejudiced treatment with the human figure from the myth of African origin. It is a visual procedure initiated by Wifredo Lam in 20th century Cuban art, with his syncretic way of representing from the foundations of Santería. (p.2)

Perhaps the most hierarchical images in that sense were his combined forms of woman-horse, a hybrid creation that seemed to synthesize a human-animal interaction that is proper to the realm of the mythical aesthetics of the magical-religious belief system. Similar references can be seen in his major work "La Jungla", a true cultural-logical synthesis of Caribbean identity, built from the perspective of superimpositions and the coexistence of multiple visual interrelationships. (p.2)

The foundations of Santería, he took them up from other angles, and this can be perceived in his work, in the iconography of his images that is based on the Abakúa fraternity, a secret, masculine and Afro-Cuban society established in the 19th century that still exists in Cuba.

Wood (1999) emphasizes the previous idea when he expresses:

Belkis Ayón's work took up those fundamentals from the *ñañiguismo* sphere, which, due to its condition as a closed and masculine sect, created a much more sober and austere world of referentiality, much more enigmatic. The artist broke the barriers of Abakúa silence through the body, which immediately refers us to that zone of contact and protection that is the skin, support of visible or invisible marks and tattoos. (p.2)

The skin is that visible frontier, that epidermal barrier that encloses the self and limits it before the other. However, "...in the work "Arrepentida" -said the author- a woman appears tearing her skin as a symbol of the ambivalence between what we want to be and what we really are". The skin can also be a zone of deceptive contact, the skin can be mutant and transfiguring. (p.2)

However, Carpentier (1977) provides a deeper definition of *ñañiguismo* when he points out:

Ñáñigo. Of *Ñáñiguismo*: Secret associations of mutual protection, brought to Cuba by the black slaves, and that subsist still, something transformed, in some populations of the Island their adepts belong to the inferior castes of the population of color of Cuba, although usually they are counted among them some Chinese and whites. It has been mistakenly said that the *ñáñigos* practice witchcraft, and they have even been accused of perpetrating human sacrifices. (p.163)

But while their members may indulge in magical practices in isolation, sorcery, strictly speaking, is not part of the ritual. In their meetings, the *ñáñigos* observe a colorful and complicated ceremonial, which includes songs, dances and percussions of great beauty. They have their own dialect, the *apapa*. This sect constitutes, in short, a sort of popular masonry, endowed with a pantheistic and abstract religion that mixes the cult of *Eribó* - "great force that animates everything"- with the veneration of the ancestors. (p.163)

Regarding the presence of *Ñáñiguismo* in ¡Écue-Yamba-O!, Sosa (1985), summarizes how the presentation of the racial opposition as belonging to those associated with *Ñáñiguismo*, continues with a lack of nuances. And he affirms that not all the *ñáñigos* were black, nor all of the type of "Manita en el suelo", even when they were the most outstanding, nor the misery in the first years of the neocolony was exclusively black in spite of having a crueler impact among the members of that race secularly discriminated.

Sosa (1985), in an analysis of Carpentier's (1977) concept, emphasizes that it does not point to male exclusivity. Membership is restricted to the "lower black castes" -with exceptions- of Cuba. He points out the great merit of not assigning to the *ñáñigo* the character of criminal-brute that the alarmist propaganda of the pseudo-republic would be concerned to spread.

In this analysis it is worth highlighting how it is said that magic is an isolated practice, but a distinction between magic, sorcery and witchcraft is not established: the *ñáñigo* ritual is magical, its great deity is *Abasí* although the cornerstone

is the cult to the ancestors, some of them represented by *íremes*; the most venerated *Tanzé* and *Sikán*, made present, by means of their voice, in the *ecué* drum, Sosa (1985) specifies.

Mateo (1999) highlights the representation of the body in Belkis Ayón's work in her statement:

Analyzing today the creation of this artist, as a result of the unfortunate outcome of her life, it appears to me in a very different way: much more humanized and visceral; completely stripped of the restraint implied by a technical concern; rescued at last from the desire to continue being legitimized as a project of folklorist and almost anthropological breath, without taking into account its purely existential foundation. (p.6)

I also realize that what I interpreted at the beginning as an absence of definition could paradoxically become now also an irrefutable proof of the capacity for synthesis. For if what seemed to interest him was the use of the body as the depositary model of dramatic force, it was logical to suppose that he would eliminate everything superfluous, everything insignificant, in order to arrive at the essence of expression; a gesture, a contortion, a glance would be enough... (p.6)

With the breaking of the barriers of Abakúa silence through the marked use of the body in the artist's work, and that, as already mentioned, this refers to that zone of contact and protection that is the skin, the symbolic force that the body and the skin will assume in her work is revealed.

According to Wood (1999), in Belkis' work, the practice is of surface and the bodies function symbolically through their transfigurations, without losing their human corporeality. This issue of her artistic discourse substantiates a poetics of the body from an essentially philosophical and existential angle. In this sense, his work is open to a profound critical reflection on the human condition, which far exceeds any reductionism to the elements of the world of beliefs of those known in Cuba as *carabalies*.

Undoubtedly, the human body served as a pretext for the artist to delve into the forbidden spheres of Afro-Cuban religiosity, which has its foundations in scholars of the Cuban intelligentsia.

In this sense Wood (1999) confirms the above:

This type of approach, almost forced by the prohibitions established for women within the sect, distanced the artist's gaze from the elements of ritual or the practice itself, to concentrate on more conceptual and symbolic aspects. (p.3).

This inquiry served the artist as an evasion, and implied overcoming in herself a limitation in the representation of the human figure from the artistic point of view. The bodies in her work are archetypes, cut silhouettes, which contrast against a background, always using the collagraphic technique. The work *Unfounded Fears* (Figure 3) is an example of such archetypes.

Fig. 3: Unfounded Fears, 1997



Wood (1999) in his analysis emphasizes that the essential in the treatment of his figures escapes from the details that humanize them, to be located in the elements that transfigure and transcend them. It is in this metamorphosis where the greatest effects of preservation of the mystery that covers the myth in his work are achieved. On the bodies of Ayón's artistic work, the magical world and the zones of concealment that envelop his practice are inserted.

But, the most representative iconography of the artist in her work was the female figure of the "Sikán" (figure 4). The artist used the figure of Sikán to denounce censorship, lack of freedom or racial segregation. To defend dignity and human rights and to reflect the drama of migrations, becoming, from postmodernity, a spokeswoman for difference.

One of the main themes of her discourse was oppression, taking as a starting point a religion brought by slaves, misunderstood and cornered by society, which in turn marginalized her by virtue of a long colonial heritage.

For this reason, Belkis turned Sikán into the epicenter of her plastic work, using herself as a model. She poured into her character her concerns, dissatisfactions and traumas, where women have been placed as victims of marginalization and of an erased and manipulated historical memory. As she herself stated in an interview in 1998: "The image of Sikán prevails in all these works because, like me, she lived and lives -through me-, in uneasiness, insistently looking for a way out".

Fig 4: Sikán, 1991



The legend of Sikán refers that she approached the Oldán river to take water in the jar and in the same one the fish Tanzé, representation of Abasí is introduced. Sikán saw it but as she was a woman she could not have the Abakúa secret so they decided to kill her. The event becomes a "foundation" of the belief, and the image of Sikán appears transmuted in the process of the ceremony through the goat with whose death the legend is reconstructed.

In The Sentence (1993) (figure 5), a black figure with small, round and very white eyes, carries on his shoulders a goat tied on its four legs and from the ropes that bind it hangs a small fish figure as a talisman.

Fig 5: The Sentence, 1993



On this point of Sikán in Ayón's work, Mateo (1999) emphasizes:

When Belkis emphasizes the conflict of the Sikán, she seems to want to emphasize her own conflict. The cause of one became more and more unfolded until it became the cause of the other. The fantastic passage must have been the pretext, the excuse; and the recreation with figuration the ideal way to show the traces of an anguish, of a dissatisfaction that no one knew how to grasp or dissolve, not even those closest to her; (p.6)

... despite the fact that some of us already felt a growing contradiction between the gloomy atmosphere, the excess of adversity that her works reflected, and the peaceful and optimistic character that she showed to others; despite the fact that in the last days of her life we could sometimes see a very strange struggle behind her gaze, a force that was something between disturbed and apprehensive, which she knew how to hide very well with her inscrutable smile. (p.6)

Wood (1999) states:

The relative asexuality of her figures serves the artist as a strategy to violate the exclusion of women by means of transvestism that homogenizes the bodies from the hybridity of their camouflage. In this dimension the body acts as a vindictive sign in the generic perspective. The fence is broken by the apparent changes caused by the disguise. (p.3)

But the work of Belkis Ayón went further. The female body silhouetted by its matrices was associated by the author from the first moments to the stigma of "Sikán", the victim woman according to time and legend. (p.3)

Like Eve condemned by Christianity to serve and suffer for being the protagonist of sin, Sikán was excluded for having revealed her secret. Both, each in their own way, possess an anti-segregationist energy. To penetrate this zone of the forbidden from a self-referential experience constitutes one of the great challenges of Belkis Ayón's work: "it is true that I am the model of my figurations and that they pass with me from one state to another continuously". (p.3)

In the author's own words, "Repentant?" (1993) represents Sikán as a woman who is tearing her skin, symbolizing the ambivalence between what she wants to be and what she really is. The artist plays with the visible and the invisible, the permitted and the proscribed, the material and the immaterial. And she wonders about the absences and exclusions produced by being different.

The white Sikán is a body-silhouette. Her contours are defined by the dark bodies that envelop and constrain her, giving her form and that, thanks to Belkis' technical mastery, acquire earthy textures as well as others that imitate the scales of fish and snakes or feline skins, in reference to the African origin of the black Cuban population. The woman's mouthless face invokes her silent presence.

Sikán's terrible fate was decided by the tribesmen while she remained locked in a cave. She was only allowed to be a mute witness to the events, just as the artist was when she was allowed to attend the Abakuás rites without participating. Both were bearers of otherness, so that their mere presence destabilized the ñañiga context, only masculine.

For Belkis, colors represented values. Sikán's whiteness does not mean that she is a white woman, but it is the characteristic that differentiates her from the dark bodies in the background. Sikán is the opposite of all of them, like the negative of a photograph. But at the same time, she is the same as them, because when she tears off her skin, the same black and earthy texture of the creatures that surround her appears underneath.

Although the artist's work was never accepted by her as affiliated to feminist tendencies, she deconstructs the gender code from two essential aspects, according to Wood (1999), the mythical-symbolic, from the ontological foundation of ñañiguismo, and the representational artistic as an essential element in the critical-conceptual strategies employed. And with this, the visual metaphor is constructed from analogies.

Despite the restrained, relatively serene, delicate appearance of all her work and the kind, affectionate personality of the artist, Belkis Ayón was a strong, defiant, provocative creator, capable of radically opposing conventionalisms and bravely facing any challenge.

She appropriated a difficult, perhaps lurid theme, which had been very rarely touched upon in Cuban art, almost always in a superficial, decorative way and by exclusively male artists, who did not delve deeper or problematize its contents.

This problematization of the artist-woman category is reaffirmed in Wood's (1999) analysis when he states:

The artist/woman appears in the pictorial space in the manner of a synthesis image in which all of us who knew her could identify her because those large, almond-shaped eyes that characterized her gave her away. She was there in the forbidden space, but how? In the metamorphosis of the mutant skins that served as her attire. The indicative eyes appear mostly empty and absent, sometimes penetrating, elusive and questioning. Faces and bodies seem reversible and function as paravanes of new concealments, of other deeply hidden mysteries. (p.3)

We illustrate this way of image synthesis in figure 6, because he also represented it in his work. He identifies the face, and once again, he characterizes the black and the white, with new hidden mysteries.

Fig 6: My Vernicle, 1998



Belkis Ayón's area of religiosity is the area of greatest explosion in her work and the one that generated the greatest impatience. Her work identified with various symbols such as Abakúa attributes related to the rooster, the fish, are visualized in several of her works and this goes back to the ancestral forces and power. (See figure 7)

This viscosity of the animal world takes with abundance the snake associated with the African, the magical and the primitive. And in the search for a new experimentation, he acted as a guide in the use of the backgrounds on which his figures were cut out, demonstrating an expert laboriosity in collagraphy.

The field of Abakúa religiosity offered him an opportunity of reflection and criticism from those symbols to impact with his work, without using the referents of the *ñáñigo* language, nor of his deities, he built his work until becoming an important referent of contemporary Cuban art, constructing elements that work as the metaphor of symbolic transmutation of the body. This is reflected in the shaved heads of the women in his works and in the apparently tattooed bodies.

We confirm the symbolic relationship of the figures in the midst of all that is transcendental and myths, and in particular, the relationship of the shapes of the fish and the eyes of the human body as codes and symbols. According to Wood (1999), this symbolic transcendental of the figures takes as an important element of their penetrabilities.

The pierced silhouettes reveal the vulnerability of the body before the myth. On other occasions, certain areas of the body are substituted by the symbolic codes of great

significance, such as the shape of the fish replacing the eyes. The fish is a key sign, the supreme deity of the Abakúa, who manifested himself to men in the mythological form of Tanzé and who is represented in the foundation drum, called Ekúe, which contains his divine voice.

A reference to his work on the body is specified when Wood (1999) affirms that through bodies the times of history are interconnected:

In that sense "The Family" (figure 7) is an exemplary work. A man and a woman in front of the spectator. She is seated, he is standing. She is black, carrying two attributes of religiosity: the cross on her chest and the fish on her belly. He, with the snake on his neck and an olive tree on his sex. The goat as a faithful animal on the floor, the rooster standing on the armchair. It is a piece where each element functions in a signifying system. (p.5)

Fig 7: The Family, 1991



And Wood (1999) continues with regard to the body:

The textures of the body in Belkis Ayón's work refer us to a primitive state and to a game of concealment. In some pieces the figures seem to lift one of their garments to reveal a second skin, also marked by other mythical-ancestral elements. One on top of the other, the layers are superimposed apparently impregnated to the fragile body that sustains it, to the body as support of the ancestral myths that hierarchize the spiritual powers. (p.5) (See figures 8 y 9)

Ayón has left us a unique work in Cuban art, a story that fables about a history of miscegenation and syncretism, a tradition that nourishes art and artists. (p.5)

Fig 8: Disobedience, 1998

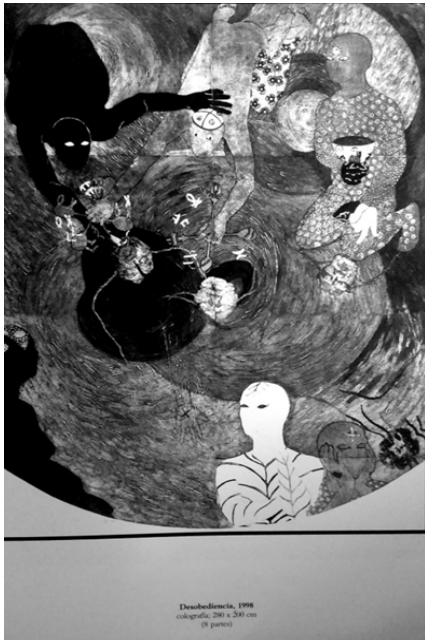


Fig 9: Yearning, 1998



According to the content of this text, the following characteristics are present in the artist's work:

In Belkis Ayón's artistic universe, the drawing defined on her face and body is revealed, and this has served as patterns for the elaboration of her images.

In her particular methodical creation phases, and in the impact of her composition, she relies on a series of effects of value and color.

To this is added the delicacy of having chosen within the Cuban cultural heritage a legend little approached in

Cuban iconography, whose narrative core highlights the woman experiencing the most regrettable of prejudices: that of absolute exclusion

CONCLUSIONS

At present, women, time and again victimized, seem to find themselves in the deep hole of a well in which light can barely be caressed. But her creative ingenuity has resisted enough to lead her own struggles from the mature and integrating artistic vision, as it responds to the modern concepts of feminisms.

This artistic vision is manifested in the work of Belkis Ayón, in the transmission of legends and beliefs, violating the norm and breaking the established. With her inclusive will, she established a defiant rupture and repositioned her marks on the body, oriented towards an ethnocultural and anthropological search. Her reencounter with myth and its conscious appropriation were the paths to discover the hybrid soul of the spirits that haunt the lands of our Caribbean.

His major work is enunciated in a process of assembly and disassembly, of deconstruction and construction, and among the many resources of his imaginary, the use of the body made his figures accomplices to represent the old myths and the reconstruction of ancient legends.

The rebellious gesture of all her work involves the condemned woman and the artist who vindicated her. One and the other were recast in images covered with the marks of original and transcended symbols, which in her creative art managed to find a sure resurrection

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