Wifredo Lam at New York's Museum of Modern Art: "When I Don't Sleep, I Dream"

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Politically engaged modern artist Wifredo Lam (1902–1982) is receiving his first full-career retrospective in the US. Lam was a Cuban artist of African and Chinese descent who was active during the period of the rise of fascism, World War II and the Cold War. In Europe, Lam absorbed modernist trends and befriended major artists and poets such as Pablo Picasso and André Breton. On his return to Cuba, he forged a style in which African and Cuban culture was an integral, not merely "exotic," component. Throughout his career, Lam sympathized with Marxism and took an active part in struggles against dictatorship and imperialism.

The exhibition, titled "When I Don't Sleep, I Dream," will run through April 11 at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. The curators emphasize Lam's stated project of "decolonization," but he meant by that a political and social struggle against imperialist domination. In our day, "decolonization" has largely been turned into a program of incorporating the elites of various minorities or ethnicities into governments, corporate boardrooms, academia, etc.

The curators also stress Lam's engagement with African identity and religion, omitting entirely his relationship with Marxism and socialism. Not surprisingly, the exhibition obscures the more fundamental political and class issues that are essential to a full appreciation of Lam's work.

Visitors to MoMA will learn nothing about Lam's early life. The artist was born in Cuba in 1902, the year that country became an "independent republic." Cuba had just emerged from the Spanish-American War and American occupation. The US had recently emerged as an imperialist power. Cuba's independence was illusory. Through the Platt Amendment, the US asserted its right to intervene militarily in Cuba and determine the country's foreign policy. It also established American control over Guantánamo Bay. Cuba's status as a semi-colony doubtless fueled Lam's anti-imperialism.

At the time the artist was born, the country had undergone minimal industrialization, and its economy depended on sugar plantations. Cuban society was dominated by sugar barons and wealthy urban businessmen, all tied to American capital. A layer of shopkeepers and artisans occupied an unstable economic position, while a large, rural proletariat toiled in poverty amid brutal conditions.

Lam's mother was the daughter of a Congolese former slave and a Cuban mulatto. His father was a well-educated Chinese immigrant who had established a carpenter's shop. Lam's upbringing was modest, but as a child, he was exposed to Chinese calligraphy and African sculptures, the latter of which became a lifelong source of inspiration for him. His family practiced Catholicism and African traditions, he was exposed to the tradition of ancestor worship and his godmother was a noted Santería priestess. Growing up among former slaves contributed to the artist's sympathy with peasant laborers.

Lam showed precocious talent as a draftsman, but when he was a teenager, his parents sent him to Havana, where they hoped that he would study law. Instead, he began studying art and visiting the Botanical Gardens. Lam's early paintings earned him local recognition, and he received a grant that allowed him to pursue his studies in Madrid.

Beginning in 1923, Lam received academic training in Spain. He disliked this training and simultaneously studied more modern and experimental approaches. He found inspiration in the works of masters like Francisco Goya and Pieter Bruegel the Elder and in those of contemporaries such as Picasso, whose work he called "not only a revelation, but … a shock." "Sol" (1925), a painting in the MoMA exhibition from this period, is a self-portrait of the artist wearing elaborately decorated Asian robes as he sits in a lush, moonlit garden.

Through artist acquaintances who had traveled to Paris, Lam learned about Surrealism, an artistic school whose stated aims were to liberate the unconscious and resolve the contradictions between dream and reality. While in Spain, Lam also married his first wife Eva Piriz, with whom he had a son. Tragically, he lost them both to tuberculosis in 1931.

Through letters from home, he closely followed the dictatorship of General Gerardo Machado y Morales in Cuba, which he opposed. Friends introduced Lam to left-wing politics and ideas. Though he did not join any party, the artist did engage with various democratic, anti-imperialist and anti-fascist organizations.

Lam was still in Spain when General Francisco Franco launched his rebellion against the Second Spanish Republic in July 1936. He joined the Republican effort not only by designing propaganda posters but also by assembling anti-tank bombs in a munitions factory. He became poisoned through his intensive work handling explosives and was sent to recover in 1937.

The artist's work of this period, mostly gouache on paper, viscerally conveys the horror and devastation of the war. In "The Spanish Civil War" (1937), a group of figures, some mourning and some grappling, is surrounded by a swarm of combatants. Two pain-stricken figures grieve over the body of a young man with two swords in his back. A naked baby lies lifeless near them. Just behind, two figures fight, one holding a sickle. Near the top of the work, a figure waves the red flag of communism. The few visible faces are impersonal and masklike. The work exudes confusion, bereavement and relentless struggle.

"The Sorrow of Spain" (1938) shows two girls intertwined in the throes of grief. The composition is strongly vertical and marked by simplified forms, heavy outlines and flat planes of color. The face of the girl at left resembles an African mask, while the girl at right covers her face in anguish.

Also striking is "The Model's Rest" (1938), in which the recumbent model resembles an ashen corpse. The floor, walls and ceiling of this interior merge into one claustrophobic plane. The two rigid figures set against a cruciform backdrop in "Mother and Child" (1939) have voids for faces. This painting doubtless expresses Lam's personal grief over the loss of his wife and son.

On the eve of Franco's victory, Lam fled to Paris. There, he met Picasso, whom he described as an "instigator of freedom." The two became good friends, and Picasso introduced Lam to other modernists

such as Henri Matisse and Joan Miró. He boosted Lam's career by introducing him to art dealer Pierre Loeb, who gave Lam his first exhibition in 1939. In this period, the influences of African art and Cubism grew stronger in Lam's work.

Before long, Lam met leading Surrealists such as Breton and artist Victor Brauner. He admired not only their work but their opposition to fascism and imperialism as well. They were also hostile to Stalinism and sympathetic to Leon Trotsky's fight against the counterrevolutionary bureaucracy.

With the Surrealists, Lam created what were known as "exquisite corpses": composite drawings to which each artist contributes without seeing what the others have added. Several of these works are in the exhibition, and the hybrid creatures they depict helped mold Lam's mature style.

After the outbreak of World War II, Lam and his friends fled to Marseille. Lam created a series of ink drawings depicting women, flowers and beasts merging into each other. These wild, lively drawings show great control of line and contrast negative space with highly detailed areas. Breton chose seven of these drawings to illustrate his poem *Fata Morgana* (1941).

Poetry was infusing Lam's work with broader aesthetic and cultural currents. Poets such as Breton and René Char fortified Lam's orientation toward European modernism. At the same time, meeting poets such as Aimé Césaire and Léon-Gontran Damas, who were exponents of the *Négritude* movement, enriched Lam's understanding of the African diaspora and its cultures.

In 1941, Lam, Breton and others fled France for Martinique, where they were quickly imprisoned. After 40 days, Lam was released and allowed to return to Cuba. The artist's long absence helped him see the country and its Afro-Cuban traditions anew. He believed that these traditions were being degraded into a picturesque spectacle for tourists.

A new sense of purpose took hold of Lam. "I wanted with all my heart to paint the drama of my country, but by thoroughly expressing the Negro spirit, the beauty of the plastic art of the blacks," he said. "In this way, I could act as a Trojan horse that would spew forth hallucinating figures with the power to surprise, to disturb the dreams of the exploiters."

No doubt this interest was sincere and perhaps rewarding, but the drift of various Caribbean and African artists and intellectuals into Pan-Africanist and other nationalist-oriented trends also often reflected a discouragement with the working class in the advanced capitalist countries and the prospects for socialism.

Lam's distinctive style began to emerge. He painted figures that were part human, part animal and part vegetable—figures that seem to change shape before our eyes. Dense fields of sugarcane and palm leaves became recurring motifs. They alluded not only to Cuba but also to agricultural labor in general. African mythology and masks became still more prominent in Lam's paintings.

"Satan" (1942) is one of the paintings in which Lam finds his voice. In a palette restricted to a range of blues, we see a seated woman and horse seem to merge into each other. Atop the figures, depicted in austere, sharp lines, are three horseheads fusing together. In "Woman with Flowers" (1942), a hermaphroditic figure holds a chalice of leaves and fruit as though in a ceremonial offering. Lam's draftsmanship is prominent; the composition balances straight lines and right angles with curves.

Lam's mature style crystallizes in "The Jungle" (1943), his best-known work. It depicts four hybrid figures standing in a dense field of sugarcane. The creatures' faces seem to draw equally from Cubism and from African masks. In this emphatically vertical composition, figure blends with ground. Breasts, buttocks, lips and outstretched hands stand out amid the verticality, and an open pair of scissors offsets these sensual features with the threat of violence. The silvery blue palette with highlights of green, pink and orange evokes moonlight. The setting is nonspecific and dreamlike. Some have interpreted the painting as an evocation of Cuba's plantation economy and slave labor. Others see a criticism of the exoticization of the Caribbean.

As he began exploring and developing this imagery, Lam also experimented with his palette and his technique. In works such as "La Nuit" (1944), the artist used heavy impasto. In contrast, the rainbow-hued "Omi Obini" (1943) is stippled, and Lam allowed much white space to show through.

In 1946, the artist returned to Europe for the first time after World War II. Seeing the war's effects on Paris greatly affected him. The trip also heightened Lam's awareness of European imperialist exploitation of the Caribbean. Back in Cuba, he began simplifying his forms and adopting a rich, dark palette to incorporate the formal elements of African art into his style. He evoked African religions more overtly. His paintings became more austere and dramatic; they began to incorporate horned heads, birds, horseshoes, rhomboids and knives.

"Nativity" (1947), one of the works of this period, has a simple yet dynamic composition. A pale, Cubist-inflected figure is splayed across the middle of the canvas and menaced by a two-headed birdlike figure, while another birdlike figure spits out a large egg. In "Threshold" (1950), three razor-sharp, tusk-bearing rhomboids float over their apparent victim, a serpentlike creature, as a horned child looks on.

After Fulgencio Batista's 1952 military coup, Lam left Cuba permanently, first settling in Paris. Three years later, he exhibited paintings at Havana University to show his support for the students' protests against the new dictatorship.

Beginning in 1958, Lam returned to the theme of sugarcane in his series of "Bush" paintings. These nearly abstract works show thickets of intersecting stalks with occasional thorns and blades. The works emphasize rhythm. Many exhibit controlled draftsmanship, while others bear slightly free paint strokes and splatters. They create a sense of space and depth despite the density of the stalks.

After the 1959 revolution led by Fidel Castro, Lam created a painting for the presidential palace and co-organized art exhibitions in Havana. But the exhibition mentions neither Lam's opposition to Batista nor his sympathy for Castro's left nationalist regime.

In the 1970s, Lam began experimenting with ceramics, and several of his highly textured plates and vases are on display. In Europe, Lam also renewed his collaborative graphic work with poets such as Char and Édouard Glissant.

In 1979, Lam showed Aimé Césaire a series of dreamlike color etchings of active, fantastical figures in pursuit and in flight. Images of genitals and eggs recur throughout the series. The draftsmanship is crisp, and the palette is dark with luminous whites. Inspired by these etchings, Césaire wrote a suite of poems on the theme of genesis. Lam's etchings and Césaire's poems were published in a portfolio titled "Annunciation" (1982) in the year of Lam's death.

Lam was among a generation of artists and poets from former colonial countries who integrated indigenous imagery into new and personal modernist styles. The Mexican artists Diego Rivera and Rufino Tamayo, for example, rooted their work as much in pre-Columbian color and iconography as in modernism. The *Négritude* poets such as Césaire, Damas and Léopold Sédar Senghor were the literary expression of this tendency. These artists' trajectories were shaped by a period of economic crisis, world war and the European imperialist powers' loss of their overseas possessions and also often, as noted, by illusions in various bourgeois nationalist trends.

By bringing African masks and deities into his work, Lam sought to confront ahistorical and mystifying depictions of African culture. His sugarcane fields and blades place the African diaspora and its culture in the historical context of plantation violence. Lam's rebellion against this exploitation is expressed in the undercurrent of violence and menace that

runs through much of his work; it is more allusive than explicit.

Although he drew heavily on African religion and Santería for his imagery, Lam was not religious. Rather, the spirits and deities in Lam's paintings reflect the cultural vocabulary that he developed through his childhood exposure to these rituals. He deployed this religious imagery for political purposes; it was a symbolic language that Afro-Cubans developed under slavery and that reflected cultural resistance. Moreover, Lam's treatment of these beings is not traditional but altered and fractured through Cubist and Surrealist sensibilities.

Though "When I Don't Sleep, I Dream" is largely silent about Lam's political sympathies, and even about his early life, the exhibition provides a valuable chance to examine the work of a distinctive modern artist who deserves broader public exposure.