

'My Painting is an Act of Decolonization'
*an Interview with Wifredo Lam by Gerardo Mosquera (1980)**

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In 1977 Wifredo Lam made yet another trip to Cuba, in order to exhibit a collection of his lithographs at the Museo Nacional Palacio de Bellas Arts in Havana. Despite being seventy-five years old, the painter was as agile and dynamic as a youngster. They say that he has a young child just like himself, that Lam's father died at the age of eighty, and that his distinctive cultural mix of Chinese, African, and Spanish ancestry has often produced strong people. Unquestionably we are happy to see this "peasant (*guajiro*) from Sagua La Grande" so happy and healthy, and who, from his residence in Paris, has filled the world with images from the Caribbean by means of thousands of paintings, drawings, prints, ceramics, and sculptures. Unfortunately, a year later, in August of 1978, Lam suffered a stroke that paralyzed the left side of his body.

On a trip to Paris, the Cuban physician Dr. Rodrigo Álvarez Cambra examined Lam. He offered Lam special medical treatment capable of improving his condition in an institution he directed, the Frank País Orthopedic Hospital in Havana. With that advice in mind, Lam found himself in Cuba amongst us again, receiving aid from his own people in that difficult time. By chance, his arrival coincided with a tense period of struggle against foreign aggression and he immediately became caught up in it, giving speeches and participating in the "March of a Combative People" (the *Marcha del Pueblo Combatiente*). "I am very happy," he told me the next day, "to be able to be in Cuba during these tense moments. I want everyone to know of my solidarity with the Cuban Revolution and of my confidence in it."

These last two years have been good for Lam. He is a man who has suffered

much and yet he has lost none of his extraordinary vitality. He has a fine memory, despite his complaints to the contrary. Damage to his vocal cords does not stop him from carrying on a good conversation, from making jokes, and, above all, from speaking without a foreign accent and using our “bad” words with a Cuban flair that his many years in Europe have not erased. As he said to me, “I make ink drawings and pastels with my right hand. I brought materials to work with during the two months that I will be here in Cuba. I feel fine and I have a strong heart.”

La Jungla of Mariano, Cuba

La Jungla (The Jungle) is Lam’s best-known work and it is considered a most important contemporary painting. It belongs to the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, where a recent fire damaged its interior left corner. When this institution allowed it to leave its exhibition halls to be shown in Europe for the first time, in Copenhagen, in Oslo, and in Paris, a newspaper reported that the North Americans were ingenuous in having “that flag of the Third World” located in the center of New York. Nonetheless that “ingenuousness” did not stop them from insuring the painting for a million dollars.

La Jungla was painted in the Buenvista neighborhood of Mariano, Cuba, between 1942 and the beginning of the following year, along with several similar works that have not achieved the renown of this painting, owing to the fact that they have not enjoyed MoMA’s powerful mechanisms of publicity.

“I lived then in a first floor apartment and you could see inside from the street,” Lam said. “I remember that when I was painting *La Jungla* and the other paintings—because I always painted several at the same time—the people in the neighborhood thought that I was a warlock or a boogie man. Once, a woman passed by my window and shouted, “Run quick, because the devil lives there.”

Showing him a reproduction in a book, I asked Lam to explain some of the concrete details of *La Jungla*. Evidently unhappy with the reproduction, Lam first touched up the plate with a pen. He said: “This guy here on the left hand side with his arm raised is poised as if he came to some revelation upon seeing these other characters of the painting; he is astonished by the discovery of this whole universe. This is a symbol for the revelation of our cultural world. Some people say that this is the first work painted as an actual representation of the Third World (*el Tercer Mundo*). Certainly, at that time, I spoke here in Cuba with other artists about the importance of bringing the Black presence into art, but they did not seem to understand me. They thought that I was merely speaking to them about painting a little black person with a basket of fruit on his head. Yet I was not referring to this but rather to something much more profound, which is what I tried to articulate in

my painting.”

I asked him about the famous scissors that appear in the work, and also about the “haughty buttocks” (*esteatopigia*) that Fernández Ortiz relates to the “mulatto sensuality” in his essay of 1950 on Lam’s work, that, according to him, is considered by European critics to be the best study of his painting.

He responds: “The scissors mean that it was necessary for us to sever ourselves from the culture of colonialism, and that had already dominated us enough culturally. I put those large buttocks in this place here as a volume that corresponded with a diagonal movement upon which the weight of the composition in the section fell. Of course this work also has much to do with European art in its formal values. I realized my painting with all the discipline in art characteristic of the sixteenth century and above all of major French paintings, especially those of Cézanne and Matisse. I employed Cézanne’s pictorial conquests in this painting, a painting also tied to Africa in terms of its poetry, as well as to Western culture and to Cuba. The painting is a synthesis, because I have worked in both directions.” While we talked, Lam slid the upper part of his pen over the reproduction with strong gestures that underscored the structure of the painting. He had the hands of a Chinese watchmaker.

He continued: “Naturally, those forms have to do with many things that I used to see in Cuba. My house was on Panorama Street—it is not longer called that—and it had a very large patio with fruit trees. There were two in particular that caught my eye: the *plátano* (banana) tree and the *frutabomba* tree. I was able to observe the entire sexual cycle of the banana. They were highly suggestive forms that had a great impact on me.”

“There are things in the painting that have to do with my childhood—the moon that I placed here, for example. When I was a child they always told me to beware of the moon, and not even to take a walk in the moonlight. Like this I imagined the moon to be a terrible and mysterious creature.”

“Africa has not only been dispossessed of many of its people, but also of its historical consciousness. It irritated me that in Paris African masks and idols were sold like jewelry. In *La Jungla* and in other works I have tried to relocate Black cultural objects in terms of their own landscape and in relation to their own world. My painting is an act of decolonization (*un acto de descolonización*) not in a physical sense, but in a mental one. In Africa they consider me to be the best painter from that continent, despite the fact that I have seldom visited there,” Lam concluded with a smile.

La Jungla was executed in oil and gouache on kraft wrapping paper. Some experts have even mentioned this fact as an example of the absence of any will

towards transcendence in modern art. To paint a masterpiece on such an ephemeral material, they say, evinces an interest centered on the momentary, one unconcerned with the future. But Lam provided a simpler explanation, which ultimately does not contradict the earlier assertion: "I painted it on paper because at that time I did not have enough money to buy a canvas of that size." At any rate, the MOMA in New York City, with its typical "ingenuity," mounted the painting on canvas later.

The Birth of a World

The critic José Veigas called attention to the fact that Lam began painting in a very traditional, academic way at the Academy of San Alejandro in Cuba, and that he remained disconnected from modern painting (*pintura moderna*) for over fifteen years after that.¹ When he left Cuba in 1923 it was not to go to avant-garde Paris, but to Spain, with its patrician manner still dominant in the academy. It was only when his work reached maturity and he achieved a "definitive rupture" (*definitiva ruptura*) with his earlier style that there occurred a discovery of the pictorial universe, where he developed from that moment on. How did the invention of this fantastic world emerge from such a traditional painter?

Lam replied: "This is a very interesting question. I have asked myself the same thing. How did I ignore for so long a meaningful engagement with painting? I am not a politician, but during those years I was immersed in Spanish politics. I participated in the Civil War on the side of the loyalists and against the fascists. This gave me a critical position towards many things that I had not had before. When I arrived in Paris, after the fall of the Spanish Republic to the fascists, I began to paint what I felt most deeply. And in an automatic way, as the Surrealist would say, this new world began to surface within me. In other words, I had carried all of this in my subconscious, and by allowing myself to produce automatic painting, especially by means of that unexpected drawing whereby one does not know what one is going to paint, this strange world started to flow out of me."

"I think this all had to do with my early formation. In Sagua there was a fairly large Chinese colony located on Tacón Street. I lived there. One or two blocks away from my house, past a bridge, was the neighborhood of Cocosolo, a very poor community where Blacks mostly lived. Many of them had been born in Africa. The sound of drums from there could be heard in my house. I used to watch with trepidation the aggressive dances and colorful festivals of the Africans. There was a river nearby and they warned me not to go near it, because the *güije* would get me if I did. All of this was mysterious to me. I would often try to imagine what the *güije* was like. As apart of this, kernels of maize and dead roosters with colored ribbons tied around their necks would appear on street corners. All of this must have penetrated

me deeply.”

“At any rate, I don’t think the academic years were merely a wasted time period. I did succeed in becoming a polemical representative of the Third World within European culture, even though Europe had earlier dominated that culture. I was able to speak in a language that turned out to be a lucid one. If a young untrained Black person had come along painting these things, the Europeans would almost certainly have paid no attention to him, because he did not have the skills or instruments to transpose those contents. Yet, I could do it, because I had studied European art very deeply.”

Critical Commentaries on Cuban Painting

The painter who Lam admired most, even to the point of not daring to place anyone on the same level with him, was Goya. Nor does any Cuban painter currently attract his attention, although he could find himself marginalized for expressing such a definitive position on this issue. I showed him various reproductions of Cuban paintings and asked him questions about these artworks:

What did he think of the *Muchachos* by Victor Manuel [1897-1969]?

He replied: “What’s Cuban about this? We can assume the figures are genuine Cuban types, but what is the message?”

What about the *Retrato de Martí* by Eduardo Abela [1889-1965]?

“The only reason this is worth anything is because the work depicts Martí.”

What about *El hombre del gato* (The man of the cat) by Abela?

“What does it mean? This man has cat’s whiskers? And the cat means what?”

What about *Still Life* by Amelia Peláez [1896-1968]?

“I recall well the colonial world of the creole bourgeoisie; those houses on the hill are where the exploiters lived...it’s Cuban, but it is about the culture of the powerful.”

What about *La silla y la figura* (The Chair and the Figure) by Roberto Diago? Lam: “I don’t think Diago’s painting resembles mine of the chair. Above all it is a Diago. It is a painting that has not accomplished much.”

“What do you think of works by Carlos Enríquez [1900-1957], *L’ecuyere* or *El rapto de las mulatas* (The Horsewoman or The Rape of the Mulattas)?

Lam: “He is the painter who, in my opinion, most reflects Cuba—a

guajira (or peasant) Cuba.”

In the last few days, Lam has also seen many drawings brought to him by young artists from the National School of Art, who have come spontaneously during visiting hours. He concluded after their visits: “For me Cuban painting is missing something. In each work I see all the letters, but not the sentence.”

Surrealism, Picasso, Racism

Lam said: “The only Cuban publications that I receive on a regular basis are the *Weekly Edition of Granma* and two journals: *Bohemia* and *Cuba International*.

I said: “Don’t you find *Bohemia* boring?”²

Lam: “Well, that depends on which issue you mean. I like the publication because it provides me with extensive information about Cuba.”

I asked him: “I believe that you do not consider yourself a Surrealist.”

He responded: “Surrealism gave me an opening, but I haven’t painted in a surrealist manner. Rather, I keep providing a solution to Surrealism. Miró and I renewed Surrealism. Here in Cuba there were things that were pure Surrealism (*surrealismo puro*). One example would be Afro-Cuban religious beliefs [*Santería*]; one can immediately see the poetry that is preserved in this elemental magical state (*estado mágico, primitivo*).

I said: “Picasso was your discoverer, your artistic godfather. They also say that your style came from Picasso’s paintings.”

Lam: “I was not influenced by Picasso. What happened is that with Picasso Black art influenced visual arts from Europe for the first time. I am much indebted to Picasso for all of the support that he gave me, and I will always be very grateful to him for this. Picasso was a fantastic guy. Once, although he evidently had not had even a glass of wine to drink, he started screaming in the middle of a reception that he was the real “inventor of photography.”

I noted: “You have been accused of black racism.”

Lam: “That is a false accusation. They say that because I don’t paint like a European, because I try to paint the idiosyncrasies of my people. The figures in my canvases are neither black, nor white; they lack a clearly identified race. Nor am I in agreement with the doctrine of Negritude. In the end, the real issue of history is not about race,

but about class struggle.”

I observed: “Your painting *Sierra Maestra* has not been seen in Cuba.”

Lam: “It is a private collection in Paris. I did it years ago with the intention of raising funds for an exhibition in France of Cuban painters. I am going to take photos of it and send them to you.”

I asked: “In what sense do you use color?”

Lam: “With color, I seek a psychological impact in the manner of the symbolist color used by Gauguin. *Rumor de la tierra* (Earth tremor) is painted entirely in earth tones. This painting, in the Guggenheim Museum in New York City today, was exhibited in Central Park way back in the 1940s. The policeman who guarded the exhibit approached me one day and asked, “Hey pal, what did you mean to paint there? The support of the easel?”

Lam looked out the window. The sky was clear and sunny. The breezes moved gently through the fine branches of the trees. Tired from the interview, his eyes became animated. He said: “What marvelous light! You can’t really know what you have here. Look how through those trees you can see the making everything become transparent. Now I even feel as if the light is penetrating my eyes and illuminating everything inside of me. I am filled with sunshine.” Seated in a chair, the painter, the artist, does not suffer from paralysis.

*This interview was first published with the same title in the Cuban journal *Bohemia*, Vol. 72, No. 25 (June 20, 1980): 10-13. It was then republished in a collection of writings by Gerardo Mosquera, *Exploraciones en la plástica cubana* (Havana: Editorial Letras, 1983): 179-190.

Editorial Note: There are two excellent discussions of the post-colonial nature of the iconography in Lam’s painting *La Jungla*: one by Juan Martínez, in his outstanding book, *Cuban Art and National Identity: the Vanguardia Painters, 1927—1950* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1994); and the other by Jasmine Alinder, in her excellent yet unpublished Master’s thesis, *Picturing Themselves*, University of New Mexico, 1994.

1 José Veigas, “Lam: una sola y definitiva ruptura,” *Revolución y Cultura* (Havana), No. 55 (March 1977): 2-3. Lam read this brief article later. He praised it extensively and insisted on meeting Veigas,

owing to his originality in pin pointing neglected aspects of his painting otherwise overlooked in the vast literature on it.

2 Ed. Note: This interview was published in *Bohemia*.