

# Wifredo lam essay



Cuban surrealist artist Wifredo Lam (1902-1982) was renowned for his unique style which combined his rich cultural heritage with the social issues that inspired him.

Throughout his life he traveled many places and learned from some of the most famous artists to ever create art, namely, Pablo Picasso. Lam has become an international symbol for the form of surrealism, along with the Chilean artist Roberto Matta (1911-2002). In perhaps his most famous work of art, entitled “ The Jungle,” Lam puts many powerful symbols on display. It is the undertaking of this essay to explore this renowned work of art, and to discover the intent of Lam’s symbols and subtleties. By doing so, the observer can place into context the many symbols and underlying meanings that make up the work of Lam. He used these symbols and subtleties to draw attention to the plight of the African descended Cubans living in a social quagmire.

It was his intention to bring these issues to the rest of the world, who were unaware of the poor social status of African descendants in Cuba. Wifredo Lam was born the last of nine children in 1911 to Yam Lam and his second wife. Yam Lam had immigrated to Cuba from Canton, Ohio, and was of Chinese descent. At the time of his son Wifredo’s birth, Yam Lam was already eighty-four years old.

Wifredo’s mother was a mulatto woman with some American Indian blood. This made the cultural heritage of Wifredo Lam a very diverse one. From early childhood, Lam was exposed to Santeria, a mixture of Catholic doctrine and African Yoruba beliefs. His own godmother was a priestess of the

religion. Lam came from a middle class family and was sent to Havana at an early age to be educated.

Shortly thereafter he traveled to Spain to continue his education in 1923, and remained there for fifteen years. While in Spain he fought on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War, and it was while in the hospital recovering from intestinal infection that he met the sculptor Manolo Hugue. Hugue was an old friend of Pablo Picasso, and when Lam traveled to France in 1938, Lam handed Picasso a letter of introduction written by Hugue. Picasso and Lam immediately became close friends, and even had a joint exhibit. Perhaps most pivotal in these new friends was the introduction of Lam to Andre Breton and Benjamin Peret. These men were considered the leaders of the surrealist movement, and their influence would shape the work of Lam in a very considerable way.

Lam had established himself as a surrealist artist by the time he chose to return to Cuba in 1941. Surrealism was a movement formed in response to the outbreak of World War I. Surrealists contended that the horrible amount of death in the First World War was the result of the industrial revolution and rational thought. From these conclusions, the surrealist movement decided that the easy solution was to turn to irrational thought. In the arena of art, surrealism relies heavily on the idea of images and symbols that appeal to a deeper understanding in the unconscious of human minds.

Many works by Lam contain symbols that are meant to evoke emotions subconsciously. However, Lam also added a very significant aspect to his work. He created his art in the surrealist model, but he used his work to

comment on social issues that he felt were important. Lam said of his own brand of surrealism: “...

it is the last liberating commotion of man. It nourishes itself on the concept of liberty which in turn nourishes creativity. “ Barnitz labels the unique brand of surrealism by Lam as “ surrealism with a cause. 2” This is a very accurate description of the Lam brand of surrealism.

He is able to comment on social issues that are of great importance to him, while at the same time using the ideas of the unconscious and symbols of surrealism. The foremost importance for Lam was to expose the poor social conditions within his native country of Cuba. Lam felt a special connection to the poor blacks of Cuba, and attempted to illustrate their strife, frustration, and social inferiority. Lam commented to the critic Max-Pol Fouchet on his feelings on returning to Cuba and the poor condition of the black people he found there: Havana at that time was a land of pleasure, of sugary music, mambas, rumbas and so forth. The Negroes were considered picturesque.

They themselves aped the whites and regretted that they did not have light skins. And they were divided – the blacks disdained the mulattos, and the mulattos detested heir own skin because they were no longer like their fathers, but were not white either<sup>3</sup>. This synopsis of the black race in Cuba at the time greatly disturbed Lam. His mother was of partial African descent; therefore he was of African descent. He felt a very personal connection to this issue.

Lam took it upon himself to make art that would reflect the deplorable social status of blacks in Cuba. He would offer these works as a criticism of the

social standing of blacks in Cuba. “The Jungle,” (see Figure 1) created in 1943 by Lam was considered by many his masterpiece; a demonstration of his mastery of his specific style of surrealism with an underlying social agenda. Lam had just returned from France two years earlier when forced to flee from the advancing Nazis. After a long arduous journey home on various steamer ships, Lam set himself on alerting the world to the pathetic social positions of the black people of Cuba. This piece, unlike most of the art stemming from Latin America, was not meant for the people of Latin America.

The people of Cuba were already aware of the deplorable state of the African descended inhabitants of their country. Rather, this was a piece of art meant to be viewed by the rest of the world. This piece was intended to alert other nations to the lowly conditions in Cuba. The first aspect that one notices when studying “The Jungle” is the title.

Lam entitled this piece “La Jungla,” however; there are no jungles in Cuba. On first glance at this work, the eye is attracted to the soothing colors of green and blue. The observer also notices what appear to be bamboo-like shoots protruding from the background. The title seems to be fitting given the color and the foliage. In reality, “The Jungle” to the observer is actually a sugar cane plantation.

It is meant to represent a place of shameful and ugly occurrences. It is also possible that Lam was referencing the slaves that once patrolled many sugarcane fields on the island of Cuba. Regardless of the significance of the sugarcane plants, it helps to create a feeling of a very small, cramped space.

The mood is almost one of frustration and claustrophobia. It also seems that this scene is in the moonlight, or a scarcely lit area. Barnitz labels the sugarcane background as a “ symbol of servitude, 4” and Lam himself describes what he was attempting to portray in this part of his work: .

. the title has nothing to do with the real countryside in Cuba, where there is no jungle, but woods, hills and open country, and the background of the picture is a sugarcane plantation. My intention was to communicate a psychic state. This establishes that whatever occurrences transpire in the jungle is disapproved of by Lam.

By “ psychic state,” Lam meant he was attempting to portray an event or area that was in a sort of a manic funk. It is easy for the observer to understand this psychic state that Lam was attempting to portray. When initially observing “ The Jungle,” one struggles to process what is occurring. The dark colors and schemes of cubist figures that intertwine are difficult to interpret.

I believe this is how Lam attempted to make the observer notice the “ psychic state” of the subjects in the painting. The subjects of “ The Jungle” are four intertwining, cubist women who seem to share a body with the foliage surrounding them. The observer is immediately drawn to the distorted, exaggeratingly bulging rumps and breasts. Also apparent are the limbs that seem to spring from all different places in the surrounding foliage. Lucie-Smith describes the sight as women that “ have huge feet, vestigial torsos and bulging buttocks and breasts, swollen like ripe fruit. 6” To notice

that the sagging breasts and bulging rumps of the women appear as ripening fruit is a very valid observation.

This fits into the whole scheme of these women being intertwined with the surrounding foliage. The women begin to exhibit characteristics that belong to the plants, and not themselves. Moreover, many of the limbs that seem to randomly poke out of the sugarcane also adopt characteristics of humans. These limbs appear to be half arm, half branch. This completes the illusion of melding plant and human life together.

For what reason does Lam exaggerate the form of the female body? He made these exaggerations as a way of portraying these women as he sees them in his native country of Cuba. Lam comments on the exaggerations he included: Look at my monsters and the gestures that they make. The one on the right proffering its rump, as obscene as a whore. 7 It is very apparent through this excerpt from Lam that he has much disapproval for the social status of the subjects in “ The Jungle. When observing the piece, it has a very primitive feeling to it.

It feels much like a tribal painting, almost as if these characters were participating in a ritualistic dance. The symbols within this piece are very powerful and interpret the underlying social meaning. First and foremost are the masks worn by the human-plant hybrids that are the main subject of “ The Jungle. ” These masks are distinctly African, and this is how the observer knows to associate them with the blacks of Cuba. They also contribute to the sensation that this scene is a primitive one.

The use of the masks is very similar to that of Picasso's "Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)" (see Figure 2), in which the figures adorn African masks. These masks have several reasons for appearing. The first reason is the obvious connection between the masks and the African descended people that this piece of art was meant to aid. Lam sought to expose the awful social conditions that the blacks of Cuba were living in, and needed to identify with them somehow. The second reason for the appearance of the African masks is to symbolize and recognize the religion of Santeria that many blacks practice in Cuba. Santeria, as discussed before, is a mixture of Catholic and Yoruba beliefs.

Barnitz points out that the title "The Jungle" may be a way of referring to "a sacred space, which practitioners of Santeria call the jungle, for the worship of Afro-Cuban deities. 8" This suggests that perhaps the title of "The Jungle" not only refers to a place of degradation and shame, but as a place where Santeria was practiced by its followers. Barnitz continues by saying that "Lam used a mulata prostitute as a metaphor for Cuba's degradation. 9" When Lam referred to the woman on the right "

.. offering its rump, as obscene as a whore," he meant to comment on the problem of prostitution facing Cuba. The supposed prostitute is also wearing an African mask, suggesting that prostitution is also a problem in the black community. Aside from the African masks, another symbol is extremely visible in the upper right-hand corner of "The Jungle." A pair of scissors is being clutched by a hand that mysteriously protrudes from the background foliage.



The scissors are open and in prime cutting position. A scheme of reddish orange that starts at the bottom of the right side seems to lead your eyes to the cutting instrument. The appearance of these scissors in “ The Jungle” is an attempt to capture the position that the blacks found themselves in. It is in this primitive, socially retarded realm that the blacks have found themselves in. They would seek to cut themselves away from this life.

The way in which the scissors are open at the ready position seem to convey a sense of desperation; almost as if to say “ We will try anything to release ourselves. ” Remember that these characters are portrayed in front of a thicket of sugarcane. This is meant to suggest the idea of servitude and helplessness, and it is from this that the desperation is born. Lam summarizes his feelings about what he attempted to portray: Look, too, at the scissors in the upper right-hand corner.

My idea was to represent the spirit of the negroes in the situation in which they were then. I have used poetry to show the reality of acceptance and protest. 10 Lam is very clear on his intent to establish some awareness about the social plight that black people in Cuba have been consumed by. Worth mentioning is the similarity of Lam’s “ The Jungle,” and Picasso’s “ Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. M.). ” In Picasso’s piece, there are five figures in a confined room, three of which are wearing African masks.

The similarity to “ The Jungle” is very easy to see. The women portrayed by Picasso are in a similar vertical fashion, in a confined area of indefinable space. It gives the feeling of uneasiness, or some kind of repulsion. It is well documented that Picasso and Lam were close friends during their time

together in France, and this similarity in their work is not that surprising. From studying “ The Jungle” in detail, the meaning of the painting is very apparent. Wifredo Lam was attempting to reach the outside world and alert them to the poor conditions that the blacks were living in.

His use of surrealism plays with symbols to our unconscious thoughts and feelings. The use of the African masks identifies the blacks that he is concentrating on, while at the same time referring to the world of Santeria. He uses the image of scissors to convey a sense of desperation and turmoil from the black community. Lam also included distinctly disproportionate bodies to accentuate the growing problem of prostitution in Cuba. By combining all of these features, Lam paints a very clear picture to the observer on his views about his home country. I originally selected this piece because it caught my eye with its vivid, enthusiastic color and unusual style.

My attraction was one that was purely aesthetic, as if I had seen a beautiful woman. Beyond the way it catches the eye, “ The Jungle” sends its observers a powerful and stoic message about the unacceptable social standing of the black people of Cuba. It seeks to play off of our unconscious thoughts in relation to the African masks, the scissors and the strangely distorted body parts. This work of art displays a message to its observers, and it is a powerful one.