At the Crossroads of Modernism: A Liminal Terrain

Charles Merewether

I wanted with all my heart to paint the essence of my country, but by thoroughly expressing the negro spirit, the beauty of the plastic art of the blacks. In this way I could act as a Trojan horse that would spread both hallucinating figures with the power to surprise, to disturb the dreams of the exploiters.

Wifredo Lam

Wifredo Lam, after having championed French modernism in the 1930s, returned home to Cuba in 1941 and transformed his art into a critical practice of cultural decolonization. His work marks a crossroad: Under the impact of Afro-Cuban culture, Lam’s art not only disrupted, but pushed and transformed European modernism. Recognizing his projections, thresholds, and limits as a source, as well as the relation of its premises to colonial structures, Lam paved the way for the emergence of a new form of modernism. This essay will focus on Wifredo Lam’s artistic engagement with Afro-Cuban culture, which, through the complex prism of his European experience and education, allowed him to discover the identity of the self founded in a hybrid American community of belief and history. Lam’s artistic path is best followed through three tropes, or images as signs: woman, the black, and nature—invested with colonial relations of discrimination, these three tropes became central to the formation of European modernist primitivism. Lam appropriated them, turning the gaze of his figures, whether of the woman or the black, outward, back to Europe—like the figure gazing from the purgatory that contained the non-European world in many of his paintings—upon the assumptions of history and modernism. This discussion, then, concerns how Wifredo Lam crossed the limits of European modernism through a derived terrain, opening new spaces for exploration throughout the Americas.

Lam was born in 1902 in the small country town of Sagua La Grande, Cuba. His mother, Ana Seralino, was a mulatto, of African and Spanish descent, and his father, Lam Yam, a Chinese merchant, who had come from Canton. Sagua La Grande was an ethnically mixed town of several thousand people, which gave the young Wifredo the experience, through family, friends and his neighborhood, of African, Chinese, and Spanish traditions. In particular, his godmother, Montesino Wilson, a black woman and leader in the Afro-Cuban religion of Santería, provided him direct contact with and knowledge of the everyday life of Afro-Cubans and the importance of religious beliefs and practices held for them. In 1916, at the age of fourteen, Lam moved to Havana to live with relatives so he could attend the Academia de San Alejandro, the principal fine arts school in the capital. Within four years, Lam was participating in the annual exhibitions of the Salón de la Asociación de pintores y escultores (Painters’ and Sculptors’ Association), and in 1923, on the eve of his departure for Spain, he held a one-person show in his hometown under the auspices of La Sociedad, Circulo de Cultura y Recreos [Society, Circles of Culture and Recreation].

Lam spent the next fourteen years in Spain, studying and painting under the tutelage of Fernandez Alvarez de Sotomayor—curator of the Prado and luminary of Spanish academic painting—many and then losing his wife and infant son to tuberculosis, and living through the Spanish Civil War, finally leaving for Paris in 1938. He entered the circles of Pablo Picasso and the Surrealists, departing at the last minute for Marseilles as France fell to the Nazis. There, in June 1940, he met his Surrealist friends again, and some months later, in early 1941, the group sailed with several hundred sponsored artists and intellectuals for the Caribbean. Thus, years after he first left, Lam arrived back in his homeland, where he maintained residence from 1942 to 1952, with intermittent sojourns to Haiti, New York, and Paris. In 1952 Lam moved back to Paris to live. Over the next thirty years until his death in September 1955, he lived and worked between Paris, Cuba, New York, Italy, and the world, creating an art that would stand as a sign for the continuing renewal, vibrancy, and power of Afro-Cuban culture.

The Double Encounter

In Europe, Lam discovered artists and writers looking to their cultural heritage (especially his African heritage), fashioning themselves through imaging this “other,” making for him, an artist looking to European tradition, a double encounter. Non-Western cultures had become a source and point of reference for the West, as in surrealist and primitivist modernism (that is, the work of Guillaume Apollinaire, Picasso, or Max Ernst); the ethnography of Marcel Griaule, Marcel Mauss, and Michel Leiris; the Surrealists of André Breton, Roger Caillois, or Georges Bataille; and the political movements of émigré Africans, African-Americans, and Caribbean intellectuals. The cultural and artistic enthusiasm for black culture and his close association with Picasso, Breton, the Surrealists, and fellow Caribbeaners, such as writers Aleja Carpentier and Aimé Césaire, provided Lam with the inspiration and means not only to call upon his heritage but also to create, essentially, an art through which he could address the contemporary world of Afro-Cuban art. Returning to his native land almost two decades after 1923 departure, Lam experienced another double encounter; he discovered that European primitivist modernism had already arrived and became a part of modern Cuban culture. The experience for Lam was being inside a hall of mirrors. However, it was not one culture reflecting off the other. It was, rather, Afro-Cuban culture mirrored in the eyes of the West, and West mirrored in the eyes of its other—in his case, Cuban culture. Lam arrived at a time when Afro-Cuban culture was becoming a subject of intense study and recontextualization, specifically in terms of its source representation. An Afro-Cubanism movement—launched 1929—was flourishing. This movement of scholars and artists included novelists like Céspedes and the poet Nicolás Guillén, who had begun to write a new literature interrelated in the stories and language of a Cuban culture. Fernandez Ortiz, the leading anthropologist of Cuba, had been writing positive histories of Afro-Cuban culture since the turn of the century, but in the 1940s he underwent a conversion became not only an advocate of change, but also a defender of Afro-Cuban history and a champion of the necessity of liberation from the bonds of colonialistic and epistemologies embodied in hegemonic forms of representation. Lydia Cabrera, a young ethnologist and poet and folklorist, had begun what was to become a successful project documenting the stories, beliefs, and customs of Afro-Cuban religious cultures. Even so, such work was done within, as much as against, existing traditions and tendencies of representing Afro-Cuban culture as low-life subject matter for modern genre painting, or as the mesmerizing primitive of the Afro-Cuban underground and nightlife of clubs. One of the most famed clubs was the Tropicana, where Lam witnessed spectacles of primitivism performed by his fellow Cubans for North American and European tourists—the parade of neoromantic black cuban woman dancing under the night sky amidst palm trees, moving the sound of drums that called upon the spirit world to descend and enter the body of the living. Such pageants of primitivism depicted Afro-Cubans in a state of nature, in which their exposure and nudity stood for their savagery. These representations form local history of a larger history of primitivism and image making, in a political and artistic, in which three tropes—that of the black, the figure of woman (or the nude), and nature—are central to the colonizing discourse. In Cuba, as in Paris, the subject of race, gender, and land was seen
exoticized, and invested with magic. 5 To the magic of Afro-Cuban religious culture, colonization fused its own magic, the magic of primitivism. 6 In a hall of mirrors, then, the question of cultural identity and origin could not be taken for granted. It was invested with different and hidden agendas and therefore a subject for contest. Western primitivism consisted of a projection of a social definition of self constructed from being and otherness. The non-Western other defined in a fundamental way what it meant to be Western. Thus, Western colonialism and primitivism worked hand in hand. The tropes of the black woman, and nature represented the enigmatic subject of the other, that which was to be either conquered, explored, or entered into, a kind of threefold taxonomy of race, gender, and land folded into one another. 7 What Lami discovered in primitivism within Cuba was its profoundly embedded, essentializing politics of difference and discrimination: there was the cultural elite, who belonged to the Western center of civilization, and then the other, those who inhabited an outside, an inexorable space populated by the savage, wild, and mythical, a world of dreams and fantasies and the dominance of the unconscious and irrational. 8 In such terms, the modernist’s non-Western other offered the “civilized” West not only land to be colonized in the political and economic interests of imperial expansion, but also an alternative model of society and self for those disenchanted with their own culture as, for instance, many were in the period following World War I or under fascism in the 1930s. Primitivizing the other became a means by which Western modernism could locate and satisfy its quest for origin, authenticity, and identity. Modernist primitivism took its potency and character from an ambiguity, a kind of double name: its subject was constituted simultaneously of recognition and disavowal. Its dynamic was not based on a polarity of civilization/barbarism or of dystopia/utopia, as in the work of Paul Gauguin. It was, rather, a far more ambivalent play of forces and representations, between the West and non-West, between self and other. In these terms, the crucial interpretative problem, especially for Afro-Cubanist modernists, concerns how the colonial (the other) appears or is produced as a subject within European modernism and how that modernism appears and then develops within a colonial context. This question is posed: If Western primitivism served to assimilate the threat and shock of other cultures, and if it provided the limits of identity, a center and norm for the West, how then do we address its point of view in those very countries from which it has drawn its power? Lami’s work, as does the work of Carpenter and Césaire, shows unmistakably that the West and non-West are interrelated in each other’s histories. But more critically it shows that, because Western primitivism as a practice and framework sets the conditions of possibility and of knowledge in a contemporary Afro-Cuban culture, then it also provides the conditions for rupture. It is, in other words, the point of departure from which to speak for Afro-Cuban culture. Primitivist modernism was the object of knowledge for Afro-Cubanists, but their ambition was to turn this projection of their cultures around in order to challenge the West and the colonial dynamic. In paintings such as those of the Cauca series of 1946–1947, with their darkened profiles of monstrous heads bristling with jagged horns and teeth, Lami created a primitivist image of the world of spirits and vengeful gods. These images push and extend to the point of excess the Western projection of non-Western cultures as savage, primalistic, and threatening. These works disrupt the Western modes of representation. Using the dominant images of modernist primitivism as fetishes of the West, Lami’s painting "mines the forms of authority at the point of which it disavows them." 9 That is, the subject of primitivism (for example, African or Afro-Cuban culture) is seen to be as much the creation of the West as it is seen to be actually constituting the other. If we see Lami’s work as a discourse between colonization/decolonization, then we can appreciate the extraordinary contribution this artist made not only in redefining modernism, but also in seeing within it the power to subvert: Western modernism becomes the subject of other cultures rather than the master, creator, or voice of those cultures. Lami’s work is a recognition that the invention of Afro-Cuban culture as a dangerous subject was a means of colonizing that culture, and therefore its potential to disrupt was contained within it. No longer is it a question of “can the subaltern speak,” as Gayatri Spivak posed in her seminal essay on the concept of the subaltern in the context of colonial India, but rather of how he or she speaks. 10 There is, therefore, a need to read Western theory against itself, against the grain. Lami’s interest in Afro-Cuban culture, however, went beyond this; he was fascinated by its transformative power and the significance of image making as a means of articulating processes of change and liberation. To look at his paintings is to see thresholds and points of fusion and metamorphoses that cross the boundaries between what we know to be real and imagined, between the visual and sensory, between West and other.

The Modernist Self

For an artist such as Lami, as for other Latin American modernists who were formed within a European colonial context, the issue of subjectivity was critical. Questions of artistic self-expression and cultural self-determination were inseparable. In their work, subjectivity became a terrain to be negotiated, reinscribed, and redefined in terms of cultural distance and difference. Lami consciously worked through his sources and influences not in order to replicate so much as to produce a mimetic relationship, to assimilate it as his subject. His work began to signal this difference in point of view, forcing the eye to look from the position from which he stood. Lami’s work from the 1930s in Spain, Paris, and Marseille represents an interest exploration and search to develop his own style. There was no steady uritick in the development of his work, but a form of stylistic nonidentities, in which he responded to the powerful presence of Maissas, Picasso, and Matisse, as he did to the cultural and political events surrounding him. Modernism, in the work of these artists, can be understood as a practice of defining the self. For them developing an aesthetics, a language, and set of techniques was a means of augmenting and problematizing the self, especially the creative self, whose resolution was through the representation of the body of woman. The regenerative potential of the body of woman made it a symbol of origin and therefore the foundation of creativity and art. It was, in other words, the source of the unconscious, desire, and language. In these terms, the practice of art and processes of inscription were means of liberating the unconscious discovering the subjectivity of the self, the other of the self. Similarly, for Lami, the representation of woman, from the period of the mid-1930s on, dominated his art. It is characterized by three or four major and continuous motifs, including woman as the model, as the mother and the couple from the 1930s on, and the woman horse (concubine/mother) or Latin woman from the 1940s on. He developed his art through drawing the body/the woman, creating a style that, as Roland Barthes has suggested, was “a recollection locked within the body of the artist.” 11 His art become “a compromise between freedom and remembrance.” 12 Both paper and drawing represent, in this context, crucial components in defining the character of modernism. The everyday, rotational, diarylike or notebook nature of paper was quintessentially modernist in its concern with the idea of subjectivity and
authorship. The act of drawing on paper was like handwriting, able to both register and respond, in an apparently unmediated way, to a hidden connection between that which is perceived and the imagination, or unconscious, of the artist. The work that reveals to us the author is to be found in the accidental: in the slips of the tongue, as Freud would suggest, or handwriting. Style would define the modernist self as much as the themes and subjects through which it was elaborated.

In a certain way, the relation between drawing and paper provides us with a means of charting the shifts and periods of Lam’s art. At different stages of his life, Lam approached paper as a crucial means by which to explore new ideas. It was an economical and accessible form of working, but paper and drawing served a more fundamental purpose for him as an immediate means of linking formal explorations with symbolic value. In other words, while this set of relationships provides us with a picture of the transformations modernist work in Lam’s work, its critical significance was in the emergence of a new pictorial language for the representation of Afro-Cuban culture and values.

The early works on paper created in Spain constitute a powerful synthesis and refinement of ideas and styles; they express an engagement with art as a form for revising the world around him. Important examples include two drawings: a 1934, Self-portrait and Two People (p. 83); the female model: Two Reclining Women, 1935 (Private collection, Barcelona), the Cubist and biomorphic abstractions of the late 1930s in Paris such as Abstract, 1937 (p. 90), Dancer, 1939 (p. 99), or Composition in Yellow, 1939 (p. 110), and his collaborative work with the Surrealists in Marseilles in late 1940, such as his drawings for Bréton’s book, Fatal Morgana, 1940, or the 1940 series of codacrite exquis, “exquisite corpse” (Musée national d’art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris). Lam’s work of the 1930s reflects a capacity to work both outside and within academicism, alternately recording scenes of daily and domestic life and the Spanish Civil War, as in Window, 1936 (Private collection, Barcelona); Seated Figure, 1938-1939 (Private collection, New Jersey; and The Spanish Civil War, ca. 1936 (Private collection, Caracas). In other works of the period, Lam’s reactions to personal tragedies in his life and political events may be discerned. Social and domestic subjects takes on an allegorical dimension through the artist’s attention to expression and gesture as signs that reflect the subject’s interior life—Seated Woman, 1938 (p. 97), or The Disaster, 1939 (p. 94).

With the defeat of the Republicans by General Francisco Franco, Lam left Spain for Paris in March 1938. Over the next three years his output and life were equally intense. In this milieu, he reworked his art along the intersection of Cubism and Surrealism as a way of exploring the idea of (and means of realizing) secret correspondences between physical spaces and human figures as they merge and metamorphose into one another. As in Untitled, 1938 (Collection Galerie Boulakia, Paris), The Bather, 1940 (Sadun Collection), or Seated Woman, 1940 (p. 98), he increasingly submitted his drawings to a process of severe reductionism in order to produce a sense of simplicity and monumental form. He responded in these months to both French and Spanish Surrealism, especially to Miró’s and Picasso’s paintings of the 1920s and 1930s and to Surrealist concepts of automatist drawing and the style of biomorphic abstraction. While clearly representing an effort to liberate pictorial space from Cubism, this work also shows the informing presence of African sculpture, which had become so popular in Paris since the turn of the century. [See, for example, Mother and Infant, 1939, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.] However, Lam’s work of these years is not that of an artist seeking to represent formal affinities between modernism and the primitive. It demonstrates, rather, an active commitment to essentializing Western forms by submitting them to African pictorial influences.

Lam’s recurrent studies of women and themes of maternity and sexuality corresponded, to a degree, with the interest in the subjects of abundance, growth, and decay of forms of artists such as Miró (or even Salvador Dalí) working in the style of biomorphic abstraction (see Seated Woman, 1942) (p. 29). In Lam’s work such themes and analogies between human figures and other organisms were motivated by his idea of creating a language of mythic forms from the unconscious—an idea shared with many European modernists, particularly the Surrealists. The “human body shares a promiscuous linear flow with all veiled objects” in which personal desire and memory are linked through myth and the unconscious and the world in an intimate and organic spectacle. The impetus had to do with making or reworking the self—the male self—through scale, trace, energy, and “organic intensity,” to be “in” the painting. As one critic wrote later, proliferating biomorphism was an analogue of manic activity in the artist, whose muscular activity issues in the marks we interpret as a self-disclosing subject. Within this activity of making marks lay the seeds of abstraction for Lam and for his North American contemporaries, the Abstract Expressionists, of the 1940s.

This intense period in Paris was followed for Lam by a brief but equally intense interlude of close contact with André Breton and other Surrealists in Marseilles between June 1940 and his arrival in Cuba in August 1941. War had broken out in Europe, and France had capitulated to the Germans. Not only did Marseilles provide a safe haven for those threatened by the Nazis and therefore a place where Lam and many of his friends had gone, but it was also a seaport, which would eventually provide a safe departure point to the Caribbean, home for Lam. While in Marseilles he found himself in the company of, besides Breton, Jacqueline Lamba, Claude Lévi-Strauss, the Soviet novelist Victor Serge, and other poets and writers associated with Surrealists, including Pierre Mabaile, René Char, and Max Ernst. During these few months he produced a large suite of drawings for Bréton’s book, Fatal Morgana, 1940 (Editions des lettres françaises, St. Martin and Buenos Aires, 1942) and participated in producing a series of codacrite exquis and “jeu de Marseilles” compositions with Breton, Jacqueline Lamba, Oscar Dominguez, and others.

What was important to these artists was the idea of a collective or collaborative authorship, in which a composite image would produce a meaning undetermined by any one of them. Hence, its legitimacy would validate the universal significance of unconscious forms produced by free association. While Lam’s work during these months, especially his drawings, show a continuity with the Parisian years, they also display the marked influence of automatism as a method of drawing. Such drawings as Untitled, 1940 (colorplate VI), reveal this influence in the way Lam builds the pictures, following a line out of a form to create another, building structures through which intertwining and overlapping forms can emerge and disappear.

In his drawings and paintings throughout the 1940s, Lam pushes these processes further and further, rethinking the notion of metamorphosis even more radically. Drawing on paper allowed him to distill the lessons of modernism (especially Cubism) and to translate the impact African and Afro-Cuban sculpture (especially traditions of Yoruba carving) had on him in the 1930s and 1940s. Lam’s return to Cuba also brought him back in touch with an important Afro-Cuban tradition: drawing produced by santeros, or priests, in rituals of divination. This practice involved a highly ritualized method of drawing and an intimate sense of the relation between thought, body, and gesture. To a certain extent, this interrelationship was not dissimilar to Western modernist practices and techniques, especially those of Surrealism, insofar as they had been developed through studies of non-Western...
cultures. However, unlike Surrealist techniques, concerned with the release of the unconscious as the source of the mythic, divination drawing was a specific art that embodied and transmitted sacred knowledge and the historical memory of Afro-Cuban culture. For Lam, working on paper and canvas was a means of transcending this sacred world into another sphere of circulation, outside of itself. Direct contact with Afro-Cuban religion after a period of intense involvement in modernism in Europe radically realigned Lam's interest in and use of metamorphism as a process of physical transformation, healing, and liberation. Works such as Yoruba Maternity, 1942 (p. 121), and Unfolded, 1942 (p. 119), or Woman in the Jungle, 1942 (p. 128), and his extraordinary paintings of 1944, including two Unfolded works (pp. 142-143), show a commitment to locating the place, or its border, where this process of change occurs, where a correspondence can be found between perception and the irrepressible and the real and spiritual.

Perhaps most important in this period, Lam discovered the complex potential of his position as an Afro-Cuban artist largely ignored in Europe. The work of the 1930s had reflected the ambitions of European modernism, which, in the spirit of its universalism and internationalist aspirations, sought a freedom of dialogue and exchange between cultures. However, Lam's return to Cuba, as with his contemporaries' repatriations—Césaire's to Martinique and Carpenter's to the United States—revealed that this modernist endeavor was not simply a matter of cross-fertilization between two worlds, nor the creation of syncretic and hybrid figures, but a play of force between representations and representations of representations. There were more involved than the crossing of old and new, West and non-West, formal and vernacular; these artists and writers discovered, instead, that such exchanges carried with them a violence between races and gender, structured by relationships of power and knowledge. It was a conflict of radically different epistemologies, one that stood for the struggle over the maintenance or loss of Afro-Cuban culture and the memory of their own history.

Lam recognized, as he suggested later, that "a true picture has the power to set the imagination to work even if it takes time," but equally that he was an intellectual and translator of Afro-Cuban culture. In Lam's words, he could work to represent the spirit of the negro in the situation in which they were then to show the reality of acceptance and protest. He could become an agent of the West or like Joseph Conrad's secret sharer, a double agent for Afro-Cuban culture. All that he had learned of Western modernism was shaken and then remobilized to function as a response to his experience in returning to Cuba. The character and purpose of his work was suddenly intensified by the dual sensation of familiarity and estrangement. Cuba was a site of fascination, and Lam looked at it immediately: the abundant vitality of the tropical environment and the power of Afro-Cuban culture that he had known and felt behind as a young boy, side by side with the decadent neocolonial lifestyle and the degradation and repression of a people's culture.

The Subject of Origin

Lam's return to the Caribbean was not simply an internationalist modernist's journey to a place of origins, as if there was an essence or purity that could be retrieved, atavism or cultural survivals to be recovered. The Cuban world Lam reentered was something radically different; it was syncretic and hybrid but at the same time profoundly contradictory and conflicted, a product of histories interwoven by both colonial rule and place. In fact, the history of Afro-Cuban culture can only be fully understood through its relation to the histories of both Europe and Africa.

Writing about origin stories, the African scholar V. V. Mudimbe suggests three levels of discourse through which the founding events of a culture are reproduced:

1. The first represents a popular interpretation; the second, a critical discourse, which domesticates the domain of popular knowledge; and the third is an aesthetic, a history of histories of a given culture. Lam's paintings, as do the writings of Guillén or Carpenter and the studies of anthropologists Ortiz or Cabrera, correspond to this second, reflexive form of discourse. Their work constitutes an intellectual project that is both a reintegration and reinvention of a popular-based national culture and identity, a "construct claiming to hold in a regulated form the essentials of a past and the characteristics" of, if one wishes, the "spirit of a culture." An important consideration in this project was what can be called the politics of use and representation. It was, after all, not that the intellectual and artistic community in Cuba had not been debating, painting, and writing about Afro-Cuban culture all along, especially in the period following the end of slavery at the end of the nineteenth century. It was, rather, that Cuban modernism in the 1930s took on the subject with a pointed interest in representing Afro-Cuban spiritual and cultural traditions in their terms. Yet, Afro-Cuban culture was not homogeneous. It was structured by different interests, class, standing, and relations to the dominant creole class and composed of different legacies, including two dominant religions—Santería and Palo Mayombe—as well as various sects, political organizations, and multiple affiliations. As with intellectuals before them, the modernists and the avant-garde of the 1930s were divided in their mode of approaching Afro-Cuban culture. The differences within this generation concerned more than simply the form of representation; the real debate was about what Afro-Cuban culture stood for and the use to which it was to be put. Racism was as prevalent among some of these artists and intellectuals as it was in any other sectors of the community. This is evident in the early work of Ortiz, and in a more complex way in the early work of both Cabrera and Carpenter. Ortiz's first forty years of writing about Afro-Cuban culture is a fund of information, but its theoretical and social framework is utterly positivistic and guided by social Darwinism. Such work belongs properly to the institutional apparatus of the state, to the production of knowledge about a class whose newly emergent civil status after slavery demanded a sociological study of its customs, habits, and beliefs in order to produce social institutions of law and order.

In the 1930s, even though many of the figures involved in Cuban modernism were liberal or progressive in their political views, their art or writing reaffirmed the social relations of discrimination and subordination. Although such relations can be found in paintings by many artists, including Eduardo Abela, Victor Manuel Garcia, Antoni Gaitana, or Carlos Enriquez, it is more evident in the poetry of the period. Working in the style of Parisian modernist primitivism, this work casts its subject either in terms of the proprieties besetting the dominant creole class or by essentializing difference through the theme of woman and images of the body, which contained an intoxicating power of seduction and dangerous sexuality. For instance, the poet José Zorrilla Tallet, one of the founders of the Afro-Cubanist movement, wrote:

- And the nine Tomas wishes
- And there is a smell of jungle,
- And there is a smell of sweat
- And there is the smell of female
- And there is the smell of the roosting male.

This form of poetry imitated the rhythms of African music, especially the rumba, which was seen as a means of entering transcendent states. Moreover, it characterized the mulatto and black woman as a body encoded in the primitive sensuality of rhythm, melody,
and dance. The poetic and pictorial models for such work was Charles Baudelaire’s mulatto women and Picasso’s Demoiselles d’Avignon, 1907 [The Museum of Modern Art, New York], in which mulatto and black women are promenaded and sexualized as leitmotifs for the Western imagination and against which Western identity is formed. The female body and sexuality become the essence and source of civilization and humankind, and of Western man in particular.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, however, there was a growing consciousness within the Afro-Cuban intellectual and artistic community of the need to rewrite their culture’s history. A number of white and mulatto artists, intellectuals, and writers, Ortiz and Cabrera among them, underwent a change of thinking that caused them to challenge the very basis of their earlier work and the suppression and devolution of Afro-Cuban culture within it. For their part, Carpenter, Gallien and Lam submitted modernism as their subject—its language, beliefs, and values. Their modernism became a device through which they challenged both European and local modernist primitivism, based as it had been on constructs of race (difference) and assimilation.

The changing relation between primitivism and black subjectivity in Lam’s work indicates a crucial shift from the terms Picasso defined and from the modernism of many of Lam’s Cuban contemporaries. Lam and some others recognized that race was the critical axis along which the given truths and values of Western modernism were defined and should, therefore, be dismantled. Yet, while Lam and others produced images that liberate the subject (the other as Afro-Cuban culture) from this oppressive construction of race, they remain caught in a complex imaging of woman, the other they cannot abandon. To liberate this other represented a crisis in the construction of male subjectivity for those Latin American artists and writers whose formation remained embedded in European modernism. For instance, the sexualizing of the body of woman is evident in Carpenter’s quasi-autobiographical novel Las pasos perdidos [The Lost Steps], 1953, in which the protagonist’s relationship with Rosario, an indigenous woman, becomes the means and source of self-discovery, the discovery of his native land and the origin of culture.

These images of woman, in their attempt to penetrate the substratum of truth, are really no different than the colonizers’ (the military officer’s, administrator’s, missionary’s, or ethnographer’s) conception of the enigmatic other. The links between woman (the powerless and the colonized), chastity (the hitherto unconquered and unknown), and colonization prove to be deeply historical ones. The figure of the enigmatic other is essentialized, gendered, and potentially colonized. The gendered image contains the idea of quest and conquest, and is reminiscent of Picasso’s painting Demoiselles d’Avignon, in which the scene represents an encounter of recognition and disavowal. This concept of recognition and disavowal, discussed in detail by the critic Hal Foster in relation to primitivism and Picasso’s Demoiselles d’Avignon, is an important one.30 The concept of mask and the naked body produces an experience precisely of fascination and repulsion, of lock and of excess, inaugurating an endless shutting back and forth like customers at the door. The element of the moment drawn back in Picasso’s image serves to mark the threshold between the Western norm and the place of its transgression. In a number of Lam’s paintings, we can see the fascination the motif of the curtain exercised, identifying the place of encounter with woman. Its most overt reference is in a study of a male and female nude, Untitled, 1935 (p. 87), very close to Picasso’s Demoiselles, and again in a work from 1943, The Curtain [Collection M. Gutierrez Fine Arts, Miami]. However, this motif also undergoes a transmutation in Lam’s Cuban period with his series of jungle paintings, notably The Jungle, 1943 (p. 126) and Woman in the Jungle, 1942. The curtain is transformed into the palm frond, marking the edge of la selva [the forest or jungle] and the threshold of encounter. The location of transgression and taboo is no longer the brothel but the jungle, and woman is its guardian.

Lam’s work immediately following his return to Cuba is profoundly anthropological. Paintings such as The Jungle are at once caught in this modernist exploration of recognition and disavowal and a brilliant effort that distinguishes Afro-Cuban culture by using a "carnival" boundary or notion of a liminal space to mark the point of exchange between the secular and sacred. Rather than modernist colonizing images of wilderness or essential difference, Lam created an image in which the figure returns a sideways gaze to the colonizer, as they metamorphose and disappear into the density of the palm fronds. Beyond this point—at the fronds—marks the space of the sacred and the secret. The compelling enigma remains as before; it reveals, but only to show that it also camouflages. It stands for, in direct contrast to Picasso’s image, the limit of the Western representation. In other words, the painting and its subject represent a direct engagement with and resistance to Western discourse, a kind of dissonant mimesis.

During the early 1940s, Lam’s paintings show him exploring more thoroughly the notions of metamorphosis and mimesis. Metamorphosis and mimesis were more than subjects, however. There is a new recognition of the transformative power of these ideas. Increasingly in his art, Afro-Cuban culture is the central subject, a subject transforming into itself defiantly from within the modernist images and at the same time displacing them. The Surrealists Breton and Michel Leiris, a writer and an anthropologist respectively, understood the idea of bodily transformation as the will to externalize suppressed instincts as well as the manifestation of passion for another. This passion produces a metamorphosis of the body, a “convulsive beauty” as Breton expressed it, in which identities between male and female collapse and sexual organs conjoin in a union of sexual energy. This idea of metamorphosis distinguished Miro’s painting of the 1920s and some of the photography of André Kertész and Brassai in the 1930s, and it can be seen distinctly in Lam’s work of the early 1940s, especially in a series of paintings from 1942: Man Woman [Sedoo Collection], Untitled [p. 110], Seated Woman [p. 26], and Two People [Collection Galerie Prazan, Paris].31

For Lam, however, these ideas were springboards for his engagement with metamorphosis as a process of possession. He used the concept of being possession to explore the play of fascination between his own culture and that of the West. As Lam stated in his writing, he was well aware of how Cubans “opened the whites and regretted that they had not light skins” while, at the same time, the Western desire to discover and possess his culture was not simply an abstraction.32 Lam’s work begins to turn the idea of possession around so that it is not only about the marginal (the other) but about the Western self and desire and the impermeable in Afro-Cuban culture. In this way a double history is drawn into the present. On the one hand, Lam recalls the Cuban modernists initiating the West, and on the other, he summons Picasso’s Demoiselles d’Avignon as leitmotif of the Western male desire to possess the other. At this point of conjunction, Lam overlaid another dimension, which he drew directly from Afro-Cuban religion; the femme cheval, or the image of woman-horse, becomes a key figure in his exploration.33 This image had already appeared as the central motif of the Faise Morgante drawings and in a beautiful small drawing, Untitled, 1943 (p. 113), of a woman who, on looking at herself in a mirror, sees an image of a horse.
However, the transformation into the figure of the horse in the paintings of 1942 is controlled by a more fully drawn-out representation of the woman. In paintings such as Untitled, 1942 (p. 119), Blue Woman, 1942 [Sabin Collection], or Head/Woman Horse, 1942 (p. 122), Lam focused on the moment of woman-becoming-the-horse, the moment of being possessed by spirits of the dead in the religious practice of healing. Using the idea of metamorphosis, he registered dual realities that switch back and forth like someone taken out of himself, like someone possessed. Metamorphosis as possession represents more than a figure in the formal or modernist dialogue: it is a distortion of a central subject in Afro-Cuban culture. Through mimesis, Lam subjected European models to the ancestral spirits of Afro-Cuban culture.

With these paintings Lam engaged with and then separated himself from modernist primitivism and the Surrealist interest in such altered states of consciousness. Rather than seeking to point to a direct correlate to the experience of possession, Lam's images suggest that the threat of the other is deeply tied to the dual effects of fascination with and fear of a primitiveness that already exists within the individual body. Lam's self-image as the Trojan horse truly emerges, symbolizing a play of power. Seduced by the body of woman as a symbol of fecundity and origin, the figure turns into one possessed by the spirits of the dead. As in The Jungle or Untitled, 1944 (p. 142), the image transforms before our eyes into the world of nature. Rather than seeking to civilize and colonize the body, Lam sought in his painting to display its power to fascinate, seduce, and disrupt our perception of the Afro-Cuban world. This form of mimesis or mimicry "would thus be accurately defined as an incantation fixed at its culminating point and having caught the spectator in his own trap." Lam turned possession around: the Western self and its desire for the other is possessed by figures who are themselves possessed. A spirit world of the dead, which enters the bodies of the living as a means of caring and protection from the outside world, spills out of the figures.

This approach to representing the interchange between different orders of reality follows, in a certain manner, his fellow Cuban Alejo Carpentier's conception of "lo real maravilloso" ("marvelous reality") as the perception or revelation of different orders of reality within the real. Carpentier's idea of a liminal experience of revelation corresponded closely to the interest of the Surrealists [with whom he had worked, as had Lam] in developing their own practice as a "systematic illumination of other places." But the approach of the two Cubans was different. Their technique asserted the efficacy of image making in its power to reveal and transmute knowledge, but rather than suggesting the entry into an altered state of consciousness or a dream state, Carpentier's "marvellous realism" and Lam's work suggest the coexistence and interplay of different orders of reality, orders of reality governed by historical memory and perception, or experience and observation. The role of writing or art was to explore the significance of exchange between these orders as the transformation of sacred knowledge.

As Carpenter wrote in his early Afro-Cuban novel Ese-Yambe-Ol History/Afro-Cubano, in 1933: ...the air is a seamless fabric made of threads that transmit powers invoked in ceremonies whose role is in essence that of confounding a superior mystery to direct it for or against something... There exists in the work of all these Cubans intellectuals an effort to encounter and evoke Afro-Cuban culture as if it were an encounter with a sacred knowledge. This encounter would become a source for understanding their own identities. Each would, in distinct ways, conjure a world that is secret, underground, hidden, yet palpable and within their midst. La selva o el monte (the mountain or the mountain forest) and the palm signify in Afro-Cuban religion the places where the ancestral spirits and the deities, the orishas, live—the places of their birth and therefore the places of origins. Our religion is organized at the foot of the palm, and for this reason we offer it praise. For this it is our emblem. In the palm was the apporation. The palm was witness to the mystery. Lam turned possession around: the Western self and its desire for the other is possessed by figures who are themselves possessed. A spirit world of the dead, which enters the bodies of the living as a means of caring and protection from the outside world, spills out of the figures.

This approach to representing the interchange between different orders of reality follows, in a certain manner, his fellow Cuban Alejo Carpentier's conception of "lo real maravilloso" ("marvelous reality") as the perception or revelation of different orders of reality within the real. Carpentier's idea of a liminal experience of revelation corresponded closely to the interest of the Surrealists [with whom he had worked, as had Lam] in developing their own practice as a "systematic illumination of other places." But the approach of the two Cubans was different. Their technique asserted the efficacy of image making in its power to reveal and transmute knowledge, but rather than suggesting the entry into an altered state of consciousness or a dream state, Carpentier's "marvellous realism" and Lam's work suggest the coexistence and interplay of different orders of reality, orders of reality governed by historical memory and perception, or experience and observation. The role of writing or art was to explore the significance of exchange between these orders as the transformation of sacred knowledge.

As Carpenter wrote in his early Afro-Cuban novel Ese-Yambe-Ol History/Afro-Cubano, in 1933: ...the air is a seamless fabric made of threads that transmit powers invoked in ceremonies whose role is in essence that of confounding a superior mystery to direct it for or against something... There exists in the work of all these Cubans intellectuals an effort to encounter and evoke Afro-Cuban culture as if it were an encounter with a sacred knowledge. This encounter would become a source for understanding their own identities. Each would, in distinct ways, conjure a world that is secret, underground, hidden, yet palpable and within their midst. La selva o el monte (the mountain or the mountain forest) and the palm signify in Afro-Cuban religion the places where the ancestral spirits and the deities, the orishas, live—the places of their birth and therefore the places of origins. Our religion is organized at the foot of the palm, and for this reason we offer it praise. For this it is our emblem. In the palm was the apporation. The palm was witness to the mystery. The figures in paintings such as The Murmur, 1943 (p. 111), andUntitled, ca. 1944 (p. 141), emerge out of and merge back into the environment because they represent not only both humans and spirits but also the actual exchange, the transformation and possession of humans by the spirit world of the orishas. The palm (and the cane field), therefore, represents the sacred space of worship, where the mysterious in the everyday and the everyday of the mysterious meet on common ground. The same ancestral deities lived in the Cuban bush as in the African jungles. At least, the blacks found them there. By a prodigious feat of alchemy, the mountains of Cuba transformed their native soil into that of the African roots. The mountains were the refuge of the black Africans in Cuba, their heavens, their headquarters, his temple, his Ninian. The land that Afro-Cubans had transformed into sugarcane wealth for the colonial Spaniards and the mountains to which they fled from servitude were, from the beginning, the home of their deities. Yet, as slaves and exploited workers under both colonial powers and the neocolonial rule of local governments in the first half of this century, their images of the landscape could hardly be "personal testimonies to a national pride expressive of the beauty of the land and its natural elements" or "a celebration of a people living in harmony with mother earth." Images of national pride were the stuff of nineteenth-century creole interpreters of Cuba, such as the painter Victor Lazulde. This was a cultural identity imposed upon Cuban society, and Lam's contribution was to challenge this imposition by understanding how such an identity was forged through the ideology of primitive. While the curators had signified for Picasso and Lam in the 1930s (see Untitled, 1935) (p. 87) the edge of the Western text, for Lam in the 1940s this place would be marked by the palm tree. This new curaon marked the beginning of the sacred and the entrance of the past—Afro-Cuban history and identity—into the present. Partly for this reason, Lam made reference in this body of work to orishas such as Eshu (Oshun) or Orisha (Elegua) and 60, divinities that complement one another in their roles as mediators between the spirit and human worlds, to their instruments of divination such as the palm nuts of 60, and to the sacred palm tree. In Afro-Cuban mythologies, such figures are like signifiers, figures that move across ambiguity and are insistently defiant through both mimicry and mockery. Eshu is the messenger of the gods, the conveyor of sacrifice, the trickster, and guardian of both the crossroads and the sacred forests of the orishas. As both mediator and guardian, the small hooded figure of Eshu crowns Lam's figures, as if watching over the spirits and the exchange in the image. As in Untitled, 1942 (p. 119), or The Murmur, the androgynous character of the figure is pronounced, the breasts and masked face metamorphosing into a phallic. He "mediates in the public sphere as well as in the female, private sphere. As a mediator, Eshu has to have the characteristics of both realms, and because of this he somehow remains a stranger everywhere." The significance Lam gives to myth and to nature can be understood in the way Roland Barthes defined the function of myths as transferring history into nature. "Myth can be seen as a coming into legibility: "created . . . in accordance with its specific demands, so that the myths are both present and, at the same time, challenged." That Eshu/Elegba appears in his work is no more surprising than if a Spaniard were to
refer to the patron saint of his country, Santiago (St. James). Whether one read the anthropologies and accounts of Cabrera or Ortiz or not, Eshu was a familiar cultural figure. The how and why Eshu appeared in the art or the anthropologies is potentially more interesting. As guardian of the sacred forest, and the originating source of Afro-Cuban religious culture, Eshu is also the guardian of each person's origin: "En ese polo yo" ("I am this palm I was born"). Eshu, as a guardian in this multiple sense, carries a particular significance in the colonial context. The significance of Eshu's use of these figures is that they not only represent, mediate and protect the Afro-Cuban world, but that their very character and power is defined by the ongoing encounter between the West and non-West. In the late-1940s, Lam explored the theme of propagation through offerings. The paintings Table in the Garden, 1944 (p. 136), or Altar to Eleggua, 1944 (Private collection, Paris), are homage to both Eshu and the figure of woman as guardians of a secret knowledge that was, in an important sense, even beyond Lam and the epistemological reach of his work. Lam transforms an encounter with the sacred and the concept of metamorphosis into an encounter with the non-West and that which is outside of the Western order of visibility.

For lam, as throughout Afro-Cuban culture, the palm and forest become emblematic of witness to the mystery or apparition of the orishas. In paintings such as Woman in the Jungle or The Murmur, they mark the place, a secret place, which is hidden from the gaze of the onlooker. The transparency of planes and forms or the perspectival rendering of the figure is not, as in Cubism, a device for revealing a spatial or temporal simultaneity of different points of view or aspects of the figure. Rather, these devices, acquired from Cubism by Lam, become a means of registering an exchange between the human and nature/spirit world. In paintings like The Jungle Lam turns Cubism on its head. The multiplicity of penetrative forms and gridlike layering does not produce knowledge but remains a kind of impermeable surface. The convergence and interplay between the body and the surroundings, between figure and ground, represent a state of transmutation between appearance and disappearance, between physical and spiritual realities. The palm frond, then, stands not only for itself but also for the presence of something not visible. In this sense, Lam's paintings create images of fascination and resistance, images that in fact resist being objects of scrutiny. The lack of fixity, the transforming style: produces strain and anxiety in those who seek to inspect and understand it, and rejects the instrumentality of Western "sight"; it exercises power by sustaining insecurity and by openly refusing to surrender its "meaning." Enigma, as structure, endures by virtue of what it withholds, retains the attention it has caught, and acquires a political standing.⁴⁸

In other words, these particlely devices do not produce knowledge based on visual perception. The impermeable surfaces of Lam's work of this period suggest a radically different conception of knowledge, one which is outside of the domain of the visible, a space of secrecy, and of religious initiation and power. The idea that syncretic cultures are a product of assimilation and survival is more accurately understood in terms of covert actions, resistance, and secrecy, making the old order of representation impossible. Lam's art shows that at stake is the status of the sign as a powerful agent. Two things are at work: first, the participation or apparent imitation of another culture (minstrel on a grand scale), creating the illusion of assimilation and the similar; second, a hybrid body that straddles two worlds but operates in disguise. Assimilation through imitation is made a means of acquiring the power of the object so revered. The copy disempowers the original sign, loosens the signifier through a shifting image, metamorphosing, so that there is no longer any certainty governing the presence of the sign.

Vilamis becomes not only a process within an animistic world of metamorphosis and intermediation between animal, human, and natural forms, as in The Murmur or Composition, 1944 (p. 136), but a means of disrupting the aspirations of European representation and primitivism. The interplay between the visible and unseen in these paintings brings attention to the way the visible participates in obscuring or wiping the other, so that which is seen defines knowledge but also, in fact, defiles it. The apparent unadulterated surface marks the limits of representation. This is a space accessible only to the initiated of the religion, of those who become possessed. This is the space of power, a power that is present but not visible. More than this, it is the place that Lam reaches in his painting, the limit point of modernism as an ideology of vision and the entry into the sacred domain: to see, or the foot of the mountain. Only through images of metamorphosis, transformations, and correspondences could Lam both suggest a sphere of subterranean images that represent the ongoing mythical force of history and struggle to create a secret knowledge around which identity could be forged. In this way Lam articulated Afro-Cuban culture as a living and resistant culture. It was the political act of naming and refusing to name.

Flight and Dispossession

In 1944 Lam visited Haiti with his new wife, Helana Holzer, and André Breton. They had been invited by their friend Pierre Mabille, who was then cultural attaché to the French consul. Lam was then invited to show at the Institut Française in Port-au-Prince. In 1946 he returned with his wife for a six-month stay. It is difficult to ascertain how much of a direct impact these visits had on Lam, but the period 1944 onward marks a major moment and development in his oeuvre. By 1944 the disappearance of a central figure mediating the viewer's or outsider's relation to the Afro-Cuban world inaugurates an important shift, as other images begin to appear as part of a more dispersed field of intersecting forms and planes. We are no longer faced with the returning gaze of those female guards but, rather, a more direct sensation of the landscape to be seen as a world of animated nature takes over center stage. From paintings such as Untitled, 1944 (Private collection, Paris) to Untitled, 1944 (p. 142), he moved from drawing the subject directly painting and staining of the canvas and paper with an unmixed palette. The effect is startling, because, in a manner equivalent to the late work of J. M. W. Turner or Claude Monet, it produced what the Surrealist artist Wolfgang Paalen once wrote of painting: "fields across which marks of the brush simulating sheer energy were dispersed."⁴⁹

The effect is the dissolution of form and oneself, of giving oneself up to fields of pure light. From the portraits of women in drawing rooms such as Portrait of Madame Nena Aspiazu, 1941 (p. 105), to The Jungle and Woman in the Jungle, to these works of 1944, Lam has moved in four years to a direct encounter with La selva, becoming lost in the subject of the gaze itself. Paintings such as Untitled, 1944 (p. 143), reveal Lam's radical commitment to the process of painting itself, as if it stands for the possibility of being consumed by the sensory perception of its subject. He drew upon the Surrealist concept of automation, which, translated into his own cultural context, meant reimagining art as a process of submitting to an ecstatic state of possession or ritual experience. That is, the works are about the seduction of the eye of the beholder, or losing the self, as in a state of possession. The effect of viewing such works is to submit to the appeal of dissolving oneself into the other, to disappear into the dazzling light and foliage of the jungle and, in a manner that corresponds
to a kind of self-cannibalism, into the visceral sensuality of the body. In creating this kind of relation to viewing and experiencing the image, Lam appears to be reaching for a pictorial equivalent of the experience of initiation and trance.

Into this field of dispersed light and form enters the image of the bird that, for the next thirty years and more of his work, Lam would sustain as his single most powerful emblem of Afro-Cuban culture. In Santería, long-beaked birds represent ashé, and the appearance of the head of an individual symbolizes the mind as the seat of power, destiny, of one who is a devotee of Santería. Its significance has already been indicated by earlier work, such as Woman Horse, 1942 (p. 122), and a drawing, Untitled, ca. 1943 (p. 113), in which the figure of the bird-woman appears as a sign for ashé, the divine life force of the orishas and the spiritual power to make things happen. While in paintings from 1945, such as Those of the Swinging Door (Private collection, New York), the figure of Eshu multiplies to become a myriad form, in other work, such as Song of Cosmos, 1945 (Private collection, New York) or the untitled drawings of the same year, the figure of Eshu merges with the image of birds winging their way in and out of the landscape. The effect of this repetition of form and the heightened energy and movement created by their dispersal across the surface is an image of profound Disquiet. In paintings such as Composition, 1944 (Private collection, Corcoran), the amorphous, semihumanoid character of the form, with a knife held aloft, stretches and penetrates the surrounding environment, creating an intense vision of impending violence. By the use of the knife, Lam alludes to the figure of Ogun, not only as orisha of iron, but also of war. Appearing during the mid-1940s, the significance of this work is the link Lam makes between the world of large and Cuba in terms of conflict and oppression. This vision reached its most dramatic form in his Haitian drawings of 1946; the series of figures culminating in the Cenacismo paintings of 1947, such as Untitled, ca. 1944 (p. 141), and Head (Cenacismo), 1947 (p. 135); and slightly later works such as Figure, 1949 (p. 48). Although the Cenacismo motif refers by name to the mountain spirit or god amongst the indigenous people of Venezuela, Lam’s use transforms it into a figure representing the symbolic drama of the Afro-Caribbean world subject to the continuing threat of violence by vengeful spirits. Lam suggested some years later, when speaking about these paintings: What’s so curious is that these dramas so close to us seem like distant apparitions. Knives... become in turn vigilant, disquieting, ready to open mortal wounds. Wings of evasion, omens of birds in flight skimming the surface of our eyes in contemplation of their fleeing, their exodus, like tongues of fire in an anxious infinity... The drama of these works is intensified even more in the Haitian drawings of 1946; see for example, Yoruba Ritual (p. 133). Figures float and rise or merge in space, camouflaging precariously above the ground. Their grotesque faces of bulbous eyes and horns, their clawed feet and drawn knives suggest a scene of imminent sacrifice or ritual death. Once again, a vengeful primordial returns, but here in terms of sacrifice, cannibalism, and death. The scenes he creates from the Haitian period and the implicit violence or threat of the Cenacismo paintings are of a devouring figure. The threatening power of the unwanted one—another version of the other—is consumed. Cannibalism here means an act of metamorphosis, mimicking the way natural forms in their environments camouflage themselves for protection or for attack, a secret strategy of mimics in the same way that the Trojan horse contains a secret, the figure taken in only to discover that it had hidden within itself a powerful hallucinogen. Through sacrifice and cannibalism the identity of the community is reclaimed by devouring the intruder or the outsider. Lam brought the symbolic drama of that world to the border of the Western idea of the real and the imaginary, as if to confirm the West’s fearful imaginings. His conception of the Trojan horse spewing hallucinating figures corresponds to Cézanne’s use of Caliban as a symbol of the negativity movement. Blocks would carry out a slave’s revolts through an act of cannibalism, to consume and therefore triumphantly transform the language of the white master and, at the same time, “proclaim their blackness as constitutive of their relation to the world around them.”

Following the Haitian period Lam returned, through his drawing, to recovering motifs and subjects of the early 1940s. To solve virtually disappears, until it surfaces again in the late 1950s, as in Untitled, ca. 1959 (p. 157). The drawings of the late 1940s show the artist working again with line to discover constant ambiguities and continuities between form and subject (pp. 44-46). Beginning with single motifs or abstracted forms, they grow and metamorphose on paper into hybrid figures and into a new series of works of majestic portraits of the woman-horse and bird-woman seated and standing, such as Woman Bird, 1950 (p. 155), and Composition, 1955 (p. 155). Within this context, la solva (the forest) also reappears, but in a more notational form of lines and shapes that correspond pictorially with the images of the bird-woman and women-horse.

By the 1950s, the assurance he had achieved in creating his own vocabulary opened the way for a new period of experimentation and collaboration. From the mid-1950s until his death in 1982, Lam turned more and more to printmaking, especially etching and lithography. He began to produce folios and series, exploring more closely certain themes and narratives, and he collaborated with different writers with whom he felt a sympathy in their poetic vision of life, such as Edouard Glissant, René Char, and Antonin Artaud, in the production of books with text and image. In addition to such collaborations involving printmaking, this exhibition also includes an original drawing illustrating a poem by Jean-Jacques Lebel, entitled Macumba, 1959 (p. 151). While devoting much of his to printmaking he also, during these years, produced pastels and began to work in ceramics and sculpture. The pastels on paper as with the printmaking reveal the emergence of new directions for Lam. In this body of work, the artist structures his image by sweeping horizontal lines over which he applies thin washes of modulated color. The effect is an open, expansive space in which forms lose their meaning as they travel from one point to another. Lam achieves a powerful evocation of an occult, mysterious world whose relation to the real is more tenuous, and more like a waking dream.

Conclusion

Lam could never quite take up residence as a European, nor could he ever quite remain in the community of the Afro-Cuban world. He was part of and partial toward both. He achieved and practiced a form of bifocality, in which he could recognize the contradictions and limits of both worlds. Drawing on the radical heterogeneity and the ambivalence of power within the figurative tropes of woman, the black, and nature at work within French modernism, Lam turned his art into a profound act of disruption. He mined and exceeded this modernism through assimilation, accruing its power. In a sense, he subjected European culture to the ancestral spirits of the Afro-Cuban world and disempowered it. European culture suddenly became misconceived. It was, in the hands of the other, "Africanized," and the savage of primivism was uncovered as desire belonging to the West. He unpacked his Trojan horse, a hybrid that had found its way into the camp of the other through disguise and
camouflage. This then is his "hallucinating figure(s) with the power to surprise, to disturb the dreams of the exploiters."

Lom's position reflects an historical moment of necrocolonial process and the culture of decolonization.

Only through the dialectics of primitivism, with its interplay of fascination and repulsion, of honor and beauty, can we appreciate the emergent historical moment and terrain on which Lom set up camp. Upon this terrain, Lom transformed Western modernism, revealing its silences, limits, and potential for expressing a history of the present in the Americas.

Notes


3. Carpentier wrote one of the first appreciations of Lom's work in the context of Afro-Cuban culture. See "Revelaciones secretas de la pintura de Willodeo Lom," La Gaceta del Caribe (Havana, 1946).

4. Lom discussed the shock of visiting the nightclubs with his biographer Marsha Fuchs, 187.

5. James Clifford, 197.

6. For a discussion of this interplay in relation to shamanism, see Michael Taussig, Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987).

7. The significance of this thematic evocation of race, gender, and land is that this taxonomy was critical to the formation of anthropological, biological, and nativistic discourses in the nineteen-century; these concepts became the informing tropes in Western modernism's inversion with other cultures.

8. This history is chronicled in various works, including Henri Bonnet, Paradise on Earth: Some Thoughts on European Images of Non-European Man (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965); Richard Boseth, White Man in the Middle Ages (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952); Hugh Honour, The New Golden Land (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975); Taussig, op. cit.; Edward Said, Orientalism (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), and the work of the Semiologists.


12. Ibid., 198.


17. See essay in Sotheby's Lom (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984); and Roland Macilwain, "Willodeo Lom—painter cuban,"sotheby's Lom (1948), and specific references in these references by Lom in Fuchs, op. cit.

18. Reference to deixis showing practices can be found in Lyndal Cutler, El Monte Igbo-Africa (Ewe Osasa, Way Nindo: Mibanco Colecion of the Collector, 1960); and Robert Iannone, "The Spirit of Africa and Afro-American Art and Philosophy" (New York: Van Gogh Books, 1990). The other showing practices that have exerted influence on his work because of his formal connection in the Chinese tradition of calligraphy. However, although often cited, this tradition in relation to his work has not been studied in any depth.

19. Willodeo lom, quoted in Fuchs, 193.

20. Ibid., 203.


23. Writings on the history of Afro-Cuban religions are extensive, but see especially the work of Caballero, op. cit.; and Thompson, op. cit.

24. This is discussed thoroughly in my unpublished dissertation, "New World Primitivism: Ethnography, Afro-Colonialism and Memory Discourses in Latin America," University of Sydney, 1999.

25. Ibid., 198.

26. This kind of work was carried out by anthropologists, such as the Brazilian Nina Rodrigues and Arthur Rouse, in the Latin American countries where there exists large populations of local slaves.


32. Willodeo lom, quoted in Fuchs, 193.

33. In chavalo, or el caballo in Spanish, is a reference to the Semiotic practice of referring to the person possessed as "the horse." Literally, the horse mounts the head of the possessed. "Montalling the horse" is how the victim communicates with humans.


36. See Carpentier's thesis of "to real revulsion" in the prequel to his novel El reino de este mundo (The Kingdom of This World), published in 1949.


38. Calle, "El Movimiento".
