

MoMA Audio

Wifredo Lam: When I Don't Sleep, I Dream

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320 **Untitled (Portrait of Lam Yam). 1922**

Artist, María Magdalena Campos-Pons: Wifredo Lam is an inspiration. He never forgot his origins.

Collection Specialist, Kunbi Oni: He recognizes the significance of who he is as a Black man practicing art in this particular time.

Curator, Smooth Nzewi: He was an activist, political activist.

Historian, Ada Ferrer: I see him as a visionary. He's someone who is trying to decolonize art.

Curatorial Associate, Damasía Lacroze: Lam weaves together a visual language that is his own.

Anthropologist, Martin Tsang: His work really does show the beauty of Afro-Cuban religions.

The Artist's Son, Eskil Lam: My father was global in the true sense of the world.

Ecologist, Leo R. Douglas: He's asking us to see the unbound legacy of African people, stretched out across the diaspora.

Artist, Rashid Johnson: Lam is at the heart of what makes an artist who's related to politics successful.

Narrator, Marlin Ramos: Welcome to *Wifredo Lam: When I Don't Sleep, I Dream*. My name is Marlin Ramos, and I'm an educator here at MoMA. I'll be your guide throughout this exhibition, along with some of the voices you just heard from—artists, writers, historians, and even the artist's son.

Wifredo Lam's story begins in Sagua la Grande, a small city known for producing sugar. In this portrait, he depicts his father, Lam Yam, who was born in the Guangzhou region of China. Lam's mother was of Congolese and Spanish descent. His heritage is something he will continue exploring for the rest of his life.

321 Douleur de l'Espagne (The Sorrow of Spain). 1938

Narrator, Marlin Ramos: Lam moved to Spain in 1923. Here's the artist's son, Eskil Lam.

The Artist's Son, Eskil Lam: He meets his wife, Eva Piriz, and they have a child together. And unfortunately, in 1931, there was an epidemic of tuberculosis, and both got swept away by that, and he felt extremely guilty for not having been able to get the proper care that he couldn't afford.

Marlin Ramos: During this time, Lam witnessed the beginnings of the Spanish Civil War. It broke out in 1936, after the right-wing General Francisco Franco attempted a military coup against the democratically elected government.

Eskil Lam: His political consciousness came to be at that moment. He felt very strongly about fighting against what he perceived as forces of darkness, which were the very repressive regimes of fascism that Franco represented.

Marlin Ramos: Lam joined the army and worked in a munitions factory. But as Franco's forces advanced in 1938, Lam fled for Paris. He recalled:

Wifredo Lam (Voice Actor): "To leave Spain defeated was . . . for me such a deep pain. I left Eva and my son dead. I also left many brothers in struggle."

Marlin Ramos: Works like *The Sorrow of Spain* were made in this moment of loss and grief. Artist, Rashid Johnson:

Artist, Rashid Johnson: The painting includes two women covering their faces. The women are intertwined and collapsing on top of each other. There's a sense of sorrow, frustration, fear. Lam digs into a sense of humanity and a sense of empathy, recognizing that the victims of war are not exclusively those who are physically impacted, but also those who are emotionally and psychologically impacted. It really starts to speak to how important and complicated it is to bear witness.

322 Cadavre exquis (Exquisite Corpse). 1940

Narrator, Marlin Ramos: When Germany invaded France at the beginning of World War II, Lam was forced to flee again.

The Artist's Son, Eskil Lam: The Nazi troops are not far from Paris, and he takes one of the last trains, and it was total chaos.

Marlin Ramos: Lam made it to Marseille, a city in the South of France. There, he spent time with artists and writers associated with the Surrealism movement, including its founder André Breton.

Eskil Lam: The Surrealists around Breton meet every weekend, and they do these games and collective drawings.

Marlin Ramos: Some of the collective drawings Lam made with his friends are on this wall. Lam relished this opportunity to collaborate with other artists. He said:

Wifredo Lam (Voice Actor): "I was impressed by the poetic aspect. . . . a great combat for creation . . . we worked as a group for almost a year. It was the period of . . . many inventions."

Marlin Ramos: Lam never defined himself as a Surrealist, but the movement opened up new ways of seeing the world, and allowed him, as he said, to "free ourselves from our worries and fears." At the same time, Lam also recognized that he had first encountered surreal ways of seeing the world growing up in the Caribbean.

Here's Cuban artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons:

Artist, María Magdalena Campos-Pons: In Cuba, we don't call it Surrealism. It's realism. It's your reality. There is something about the poetic imagination that in Latin America, is everyday life.

Artist, Rashid Johnson: An artist like Wifredo Lam, being an artist of color, being an outsider, he had to be a dreamer. He had to think beyond what the potential limitations were. The surreal can be a tool for political exchange, for philosophical exchange, and for spiritual investment.

323 **La jungla (The Jungle). 1942–43**

Narrator, Marlin Ramos: For many people, myself included, *La Jungla*, or, *The Jungle*, is the first work that comes to mind when you think of Wifredo Lam. It was painted following his first year back in Cuba.

The Artist's Son, Eskil Lam: He's been gone for almost 18 years. And it's a very harsh return. He has zero money, but he's welcomed by his family, and then it's a new chapter that starts. And of course, his political awareness has been awakened, and he says his famous phrase: "I wanted with all my heart to paint the drama of my country."

Marlin Ramos: Lam began a series of works with human-animal hybrids, all set within a distinctly Caribbean landscape. Centuries of history collide in this work. Historian, Ada Ferrer:

Historian, Ada Ferrer: It's full of these tall stalks of sugar cane. The figures are African, and most Africans who were forcibly transported to Cuba were destined for the sugar plantations that made Cuba the world's largest producer of sugar for much of the 19th century and beyond.

There's one figure that seems to be so bent over that her hands are reaching the ground near her feet, and that figure always makes me think about the backbreaking work of the sugar harvest.

There's a landscape that is dense and rich, and sometimes hard to distinguish what's happening. So I think of that almost as if the figures are hiding, or as if they're seeking, maybe finding, a space of refuge, an escape, maybe even a space of joy. So, to me, it captures something of the struggle for freedom.

324 Retorno al país natal (Return to the Native Land). 1942

Narrator, Marlin Ramos: When Lam returned to the Caribbean from Europe, he forged two powerful friendships that deeply influenced his work. You can see evidence of their collaboration in this case.

The first was with the poet Aimé Césaire, whom Lam met in Martinique.

Artist, Rashid Johnson: Aimé Césaire is a writer, he's a thinker, but he's also an active politician. He is fighting, for most of his life, to free the people of Martinique of the chains of French colonial reign.

Marlin Ramos: In Cuba, Lam met Lydia Cabrera, who reconnected him with the Afro-Cuban cultures and religions he had experienced as a child.

Anthropologist, Martin Tsang: Lydia Cabrera was an ethnographer and writer. She was able to document various Afro-Cuban religions. When Lam and Lydia met, they had both spent time in Europe and returned to Cuba to restart their lives within their native land.

Marlin Ramos: Lam, Césaire, and Cabrera collaborated on the book in this case, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*. Césaire wrote the influential text that Cabrera then translated from French into Spanish, and Lam illustrated it. The term “negritude,” in the poem, became the name of a growing literary movement.

Curator, Smooth Nzewi: Wifredo Lam was drawn by the arguments of Négritude in the poem, reconnecting with your Black heritage, but even more so, how those ideas of recuperating African cultural values was a form of anti-colonial resistance.

Marlin Ramos: The movement’s ideas of resistance, invention, and creativity would continue to shape Lam's work.

**325 Le Sombre Malembo, Dieu du carrefour (The Sombre Malembo, God of the Crossroads).
1943**

The Artist's Son, Eskil Lam: During Wifredo's upbringing, he would hear the sound of drums that would come from the other side of the river, and these were where mostly Black people would live, descendants of slaves, and they had rituals called Santería, and he starts to include that in his painting.

Narrator, Marlin Ramos: Anthropologist, Martin Tsang.

Anthropologist, Martin Tsang: Afro-Cuban religions include Lucumí, or Santería, from the Yoruba-speaking people of southwestern Nigeria, which is the worship of the orishas, or spirits. We also have Palo, from Central Africa, Benin practices called Arará, as well as European or Christian ideas.

Marlin Ramos: The title of this painting, *Sombre Malembo, God of the Crossroads*, references the orisha from the tradition of Lucumí or Santería.

Martin Tsang: You see within much of Lam's work what could be identified as an Eleguá-type figure—this small, domed head. Eleguá is the orisha of the crossroads. He has the sole ability to open doors, to communicate across languages, and to bring both good fortune and to stave away bad luck.

Ecologist, Leo R. Douglas: A crossroad means there are multiple ways forward. It's a point of departure.

Marlin Ramos: The word “Malembo” in the title may refer to a slave port on the west coast of Africa. By the time Lam was born in 1902, it had only been 16 years since slavery had been abolished in Cuba.

Leo R. Douglas: The point of departure of Africans would've been etched in their memory forever, so the worship of Afro-Caribbean people was about connecting to their homeland. It was about connecting to their ancestors. It was about being in communion with those who they did not have with them.

Artist, María Magdalena Campos-Pons: So the separation of the point of departure from the continent to the island is not vast. It's very present. Those references to Africa and to memory and history, in his case, is not even memory and history yet.

326 **Femme-Cheval (Horse-Woman). 1948**

Narrator, Marlin Ramos: This painting, *Femme-Cheval*, features the figure of a horse-woman. The idea stems from Afro-Cuban religions. In these traditions, initiates participate in ceremonies where their bodies are possessed by spirits, called orishas.

Martin Tsang is an anthropologist and practitioner of Afro-Cuban religions.

Anthropologist, Martin Tsang: One of the ways that possession is described is the orisha temporarily coming to earth, and mounting the person, as a horse, as *un caballo*. This idea is a recurring motif through Lam's work, and I see the iconography or the symbolism of the *femme-cheval* as echoing the importance of women within Afro-Cuban religious spaces. Afro-Cuban women were the keepers of knowledge. They would lead ceremonies, communities, initiations.

Marlin Ramos: Two women were central to Lam's spiritual education. His friend Lydia Cabrera, who documented the rites and traditions of Afro-Cuban religions, and his first spiritual guide, who came in childhood.

Martin Tsang: Lam had a godmother called Ma'Antoñica Wilson. "Ma" is an honorific which could be short for *mama*, for mother, or *madrina*, godmother. We know that Antoñica Wilson was a very well-respected *Iyalorisha*, which is a priestess of the orishas. She would have been in charge of Lam's spiritual wellbeing. It was through her auspices that we see Lam being able to get an intimate relationship with the iconography, symbolism, materiality that is part of Afro-Cuban religions.

327 **Moths and Candles. 1946**

Narrator, Marlin Ramos: Lam often drew when he traveled, creating a distinctive body of work in each place he visited. Between 1945 and 1946, he spent nearly five months in Haiti, where he made these pen and ink drawings, characterized by fine, repetitive, or sharp lines.

Lam also met with artists and writers during this trip and experienced Haitian religious ceremonies.

Historian, Ada Ferrer: The capital city of Port-au-Prince was a centrifuge of the Black literary and artistic world. You had visitors from the US, Europe, from the rest of the Caribbean and Latin America, so it was this meeting place for all these exciting figures.

Anthropologist, Martin Tsang: Lam's time in Haiti was incredibly important for experiencing the religious sphere called Haitian Vodou, which was much more public in Haiti than it was in Cuba at that time. So, Lam would have been inspired by this celebration of Blackness that is tied into revolutionary ideas.

Marlin Ramos: He soon realized that Haiti and Cuba shared the same struggle for freedom.

Ada Ferrer: At the end of the 18th century, you had the Haitian Revolution, that ultimately produced the independence of Haiti from France in 1804. So Haiti stood as an emblem of Black freedom. And when Lam went to Haiti in 1945, that was the Haiti that he was seeking and that he found.

The Caribbean was colonized by different European nations, the languages are different, but there's so much overlap in terms of the history and continuing forms of colonialism. So, I think what they're doing in Haiti is talking about all that and giving each other ideas and sustenance, thinking about the decolonizing world in ways that go beyond these vertical lines to mother countries.

328 **La Marcheuse des îles (The Island Walker). 1944**

Artist, María Magdalena Campos Pons: This piece is full of symbols that I adore. These are birds, feathers, horses, horns, lips. All these plants have the pattern of heliconia. It's a vine in the family of the bird of paradise. It's everywhere in the Caribbean.

Narrator, Marlin Ramos: The French title of this work translates to "Island Walker," and it evokes the image of someone who wanders from place to place. In many ways, this is an image that corresponds to Lam himself.

Historian, Ada Ferrer: Exile was obviously a major force in Wifredo Lam's own work. What I sense is that maybe Cuba wasn't enough for him, that to reach his full potential, he needed to leave. So he went to Spain, later he went to France, he went to Haiti. But at the same time, I think it was also a foundational place for him. So he returned to it and he did great work in Cuba, but he needed the connections to other people from other places.

María Magdalena Campos Pons: I say exile is never voluntary. When you uproot yourself, there is longing, incredible new things that revealed to self, both of the place that you arrive and the place that you left. Lam went with everything that he already knew and found ways to let it grow, becoming a new sprout of ideas, possibilities, universes.

Marlin Ramos: Lam's travels also allowed his artistic style to flourish. After returning to Cuba in 1941, he started using more texture and playing with light and shadow in his paintings.

María Magdalena Campos Pons: There is an incredible delicacy and ethereality in the treatment of the surface. He used almost like a watery material first and then oily material and when he inserts lines, they are so defined, so secure. He's the master of that.

329 **Nativité (Nativity). 1947**

Ecologist, Leo Douglas: If you look to the bottom of this work, you'll notice an egg. Eggs are used spiritually across the Caribbean to represent the rebirth, the hope, and visions of what the future could be.

Narrator, Marlin Ramos: This work is titled *Nativity*, and it expresses the idea of rebirth that was especially important to Lam in the 1940s.

Curatorial Associate, Damasía Lacroze: Confronting Paris in the aftermath of World War II had a deep impact on Lam. His paintings took a new force. They became darker and more dramatic and differ significantly from the vibrant, colorful paintings of the first half of the 1940s.

Marlin Ramos: Lam didn't want to be pigeon-holed as the painter of lush, Caribbean landscapes. He had bigger ambitions.

Curator, Smooth Nzewi:

Curator, Smooth Nzewi: After the end of the Second World War, and the horrors that came out of the war, artists, intellectuals were trying to make sense of the world. But also, there was a set of artists, activists, who were fully involved in the rise of anti-colonialism and liberation struggle around the world. And Lam was such a central figure in that. They had ambitions for world-making, creating a world that reflected new values.

Marlin Ramos: Interested in this idea of starting anew, Lam references the Christian story of Jesus's birth here, but with unexpected imagery.

Leo R. Douglas: He is depicting a traditional, sacred scene and flipping it in this way, where there are horns and tails and various other things which we would never expect to see within the context of a nativity scene. It's asking us to think through a more global lens, what rebirth, nativity, sacredness might mean to those who are not Western.

330 Grande Composition (Large Composition). 1949

Narrator, Marlin Ramos: *Grande Composition* is Lam's most monumental work on paper. And it was once used as the backdrop for the first public reading of a play by Aimé Césaire about the Haitian Revolution.

Collection Specialist, Kunbi Oni, and Curatorial Associate, Damasia Lacroze:

Collection Specialist, Kunbi Oni: One of the details that stands out to me here is the amount of action that he brings into it. The work is quite busy, and then you get to one section where a white face darts out from the darkest area of the canvas, and that just has so much drama.

Curatorial Associate, Damasia Lacroze: The scale, the way it was painted, you could really feel the motion in it. There's this speediness to it. Wifredo Lam used to work very quickly.

Kunbi Oni: This work was done on two large pieces of paper, which he then glued together and mounted on canvas.

Damasia Lacroze: Lam's use of paper began out of both necessity and practicality. It was inexpensive, easy to work with, and also easy to travel with.

Kunbi Oni: When you are working on paper, you typically will start with charcoal or pencil, and what he's done here is to leave those marks.

Damasia Lacroze: Lam then painted over the charcoal line with diluted oil paint. He would often return to the charcoal, layering between charcoal and paint. This approach can be seen all throughout *Grande Composition*, where you see the drips of paint, you see the outlines of charcoal. There's the raw paper, which is the brown negative space that he leaves bare in some instances.

Kunbi Oni: The shades of black emerge. There's these dark spots that cause you to pause and to look. I would encourage you to look closely because there's just a lot there, and really enjoy it.

331 Brousse Paintings. 1958

Narrator, Marlin Ramos: In 1958, Lam began exploring abstraction, creating a series of dense compositions that came to be known as his “brousse” paintings. In English, the word *brousse* translates to “bush.”

Ecologist, Leo R. Douglas.

Ecologist, Leo R. Douglas: I think he calls them his “bush paintings” because they embody a certain level of chaos that he’s asking us to think about within the context of the colonial experience. They were inspired by the Cuban *manigua*, a word used to describe a thicket of tangled bushes, vines, and low-growing plants. This type of habitat is actually a product of colonialism itself. The landscape was destroyed and is reestablishing itself.

But the bush was a revolutionary space, a liberatory space. If you got into the bush, there was a possibility that you could hide there because it is dense. It’s impenetrable.

Historian, Ada Ferrer: In Cuba, after the Spanish try to conquer it and colonize it, Indigenous people escape into these spaces in the woods, in the mountains. And then when African slavery begins, you get the same thing. It’s a kind of freedom-seeking that was attached to this landscape.

Marlin Ramos: These spaces of escape were also used by revolutionary fighters seeking to overthrow the Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista in the 1950s.

Ada Ferrer: Fidel Castro was fighting in the Cuban Mountains as Wifredo Lam was creating these works. And then Castro comes to power in January 1959. At that point, really, no one knows what’s going to happen. Most Cubans were ecstatic that Batista had been defeated. I think that was definitely true among intellectuals and artists like Lam, who saw 1959 as a moment of possibility, where something new and meaningful could be achieved.

332 **Apostroph' Apocalypse. 1967**

Curator, Smooth Nzewi: Lam was an activist. He was thinking of a world outside the system created by European powers in that moment, and he lent his voice, he lent his art to the struggle.

Narrator, Marlin Ramos: Toward the end of his life, Lam expanded his practice to include printmaking. This portfolio of prints was done in collaboration with the Romanian poet Ghérasim Luca. Both artists were deeply engaged with politics, and they inspired one another.

Titled *Apostroph'Apocalypse*, the poem is based on the idea of an apostrophe breaking words apart into atomic particles.

Historian, Ada Ferrer: The faces, some of the spikes coming out of the stalks, all the heads are pointing downward—they're beaten down. They seem like they're about destruction to me.

Lam was working on this print portfolio against the backdrop of the Cuban Missile Crisis, which could have destroyed the world as we know it, and it came close to doing that.

The Cuban revolution came to power in January 1959, under the leadership of Fidel Castro. The US and Cuba, their relationship had been becoming more and more tense. Both Castro and the Soviet Union believed that the US would invade Cuba, so the Soviet Union put missiles in Cuba. In the end, the Soviet Union agrees to withdraw the missiles.

But it's a hugely important event. The Cuban soldiers had said to their Soviet counterparts something like, when the island sinks, please put a floating memorial in the Caribbean Sea to show where Cuba used to be. Gives you a sense of what people thought might happen.

333 Annonciation (Annunciation). 1982

Narrator, Marlin Ramos: Friendship and collaboration were crucial to Lam's career.

The Artist's Son, Eskil Lam: We would have parties, and he would cook dinner for 10 people or 20. There were big discussions—politics or art. He would lecture us about his life and about politics, mostly about sticking together. That was the most important: collaboration and solidarity.

Marlin Ramos: In 1979, Lam showed his old friend Aimé Césaire a series of etchings he made a decade prior. Inspired by what he saw, Césaire wrote poems in response. But it was not until 1982, the year Lam died, that this collaborative work was finally published.

Artist, Rashid Johnson: I love these series of prints in that Lam allows us to recognize what the main characters are, but also, it gives us breath and space to kind of run around in the composition. Césaire also uses a lot of negative space in his poetry. And that's what Lam would've liked about Césaire.

Marlin Ramos: That effect of creating space was intentional. When preparing the plates for this work, Lam treated some areas so that when printed, the bright white paper shone through. Within these areas of empty space, a variety of shapes and figures emerge.

Rashid Johnson: This collaboration is successful in that Lam makes space for Césaire. It becomes an invitation. When you put these poems together with pictures, it's this recognition of the disparate and the disconnected, and how, when they come together, they create such a powerful partnership. That's often times what creativity really is.