

From South to South

In the past few years there has been much talk about the so-called "African Diaspora" in contemporary art. The use of this term as broad as it seems is however quite localized. It generally addresses the movement of African people to Europe or North America during the 20th century. This means that the question of the movement of people from Africa to South America or from south to south if you like has been scarcely looked at. In this paper I propose to explore the developments of Modern Art in the islands of Haiti and Cuba that derive from the all important and usually suppressed African cultural elements in these islands. I would particularly like to explore the work of two artists Wifredo Lam and Hector Hyppolite as two very different ways to confront the predominant Westernized art practice and their work as subversive "interruptions" to the categories established by the institution of Art History.

Introduction

Amongst many other circumstances repression and the diversity within the population brought over from Africa to the Caribbean as slaves made it impossible for a regrouping of an African culture as such. However, despite the loss of their communities African cultures not only managed to survive in Latin America, but also Africans and their descendants were an active part of the struggles for the construction of national identities in the Caribbean where most of the slave population was allocated in the plantations.

It is perhaps in the spiritual practices where there is a true survival of the African essences in Latin America, is where elements from the African heritage were kept alive and did not disappear into the *mestizo* culture. They were used as foundation for practices, beliefs, customs and perceptions of reality. As Cuban art critic Gerardo Mosquera puts it: "While these religions experienced creolization, changes, and borrowings from each other and from popular Catholicism and Spiritualism, their essence, philosophy, structure, and liturgy remained very close to certain of their African roots. More than a case of syncretism [...] they constituted a paradigm for a

dynamic adaptation to a different historical, cultural, and social context, achieved under strict conditions of domination.”¹ This aspect is without doubt the one that most permeates the visual arts practice in the Caribbean as an embodiment of resistance. This was certainly the perception under which at the beginning of the 20th century both Cuban Wifredo Lam and Haitian Hector Hyppolite worked, each taking his own approach given their different backgrounds and conceptions of art.

In 1941 Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz published his book *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*. Using tobacco and sugar, as allegorical characters Ortiz tackled the problematic issue of cultural contact - especially between black and white - in Cuban society and culture. Tobacco and Sugar were represented as possessing contrasting attributes. While tobacco is represented as black, poisonous, masculine and the gift of the devils; sugar on the other hand is represented as white, food, feminine and the gift of the gods. Ortiz also elaborates on their impact in Cuban society through their harvesting, processing and human connotations. Tobacco requires delicate care, continual attention, intensive harvesting, the arrival of white people and belongs to the city; sugar on the other hand can look after itself, it implies seasonal work, extensive cultivation, slave trade and it belongs to the country.²

Ortiz describes these two opposite elements that in a broad sense are perceived as the native versus the foreigner, as being in constant dialogue. Thus in the second section of his book he introduces the concepts of *Counterpoint* and *Transculturation*, two terms that have become a cornerstone not only in the history of Cuba and the Caribbean, but of Latin America in general.

In his book, Ortiz examined how cultures shape each other contrapuntually³ i.e. by constant exchange. He persistently displaces and re-places home and exile, the national and the international, centres and peripheries, and shows how they are formed historically through constant interplay. According to him, in the friction created by contrapuntal movement, a space is opened up: neither indigenous nor

¹ Gerardo Mosquera, Africa in the Art of Latin America, Art Journal Vol51, N4, (winter 1992)

² *ibid.*, p. 6-7

³ The term counterpoint comes from the Latin *contrapunctus*, properly *punctus contra punctum*, i.e. note against note.

European but a 'third element' that was the perfect backdrop for the advent of the "new reality of civilization".

Nevertheless Ortiz's most important contribution was the coinage of the term transculturation. The neologism proposed by Ortiz challenged the North American term *acculturation* used until then to describe the colonial relations between Europe and Latin America. Instead, he proposed to describe, in a more appropriate way, the process of cultural contact. Acculturation for him implied the acquisition of a culture in a unidirectional process. Transculturation instead was proposed as a way to describe the process in which both parts of the equation in cultural contact were modified.

Thus the emergence of the word transculturation made concrete the process of adjustment from a sense of loss and need of retrieval of the roots implied by the word acculturation, to an overcoming of the loss by giving new shape to the life and culture of Latin America, after the experiences of conquest, colonization and modernization.

Ortiz did not root identity in the past; instead he argued for a constant construction of identity infused with the dynamic of the counterpoint. He did not believe in boundaries - especially between the west and its others or high and low culture. Ortiz's idea of transculturation offered a way of recognizing and incorporating difference as an important component of cultural identity. It provided a theoretical frame to show that identity does not mean local, but rather the exact opposite; that it is not self-contained, static or tied to a specific geographical territory. Identity for Ortiz has necessarily to be formed by dialogue between 'here' and 'there'. Among other implications Ortiz's ideas provided a theoretical platform on which to bring together artists against the hegemonic cultures that sought to impose uniformity and standardisation upon their work.

With this in mind I propose to examine the work of two artists that have reflected on the dialogue between the black culture of Africa and the European inheritance.

In both their works Africa is present more than as a stylistic element as a disruption that embodies different worldviews.

Hector Hyppolite (1894 – 1948)

The inner presence of African consciousness determines content, language, and direction in Hector Hyppolite's work. A natural inclination towards the creation of myths defines the approach he had to making art. Hector Hyppolite created a myth surrounding his life and the art he produced was part of this mythic persona. A third-generation *houngan* (voodoo priest) and a self-taught artist, Hyppolite painted with brushes made of chicken feathers using furniture enamel and based his work on the Afro-Caribbean popular culture.

Hyppolite was born in San Marc near Port-au-Prince in Haiti, in his youth he went to work as a cane cutter in Cuba where he was in contact with *Santería* practices. He claimed to have been in New York, Dakar and Ethiopia where he says he found inspiration in the sculptures of the temples. However, this seems to be untrue. His art not only dealt with voodoo, dreams and legends, it was also fundamentally linked to voodoo by his claims that his status as an artist was ordained by the Loas and that he painted in a state of possession on the instruction of John the Baptist.

There was no real distinction between his life and his art, perhaps this was one of the things that attracted so much Surrealist poet André Breton who wrote about Hyppolite's work: "Hyppolite's paintings were totally authentic, they were the proof that he who painted them had an important message to transmit, that he was in possession of a secret."⁴

His work shows a syncretism between the African mystères and the Catholic Saints. It was important because he was one of the first Haitian artists to give manlike appearance to gods (*loas*) that had never been thought in terms of iconic images before, i.e. they only existed in terms of powers and attributes represented in Vévé pictographs.⁵ In a way he translated the Afro Caribbean religious practice into a

⁴ André Breton in *Haiti: Art Naïf, Art Vaudou*, Galleries Nationales du Grand Palais, Paris, 1988, p.120 "Les toiles d'Hyppolite étaient marquées du cachet de l'authenticité totale; elles étaient les seules de nature à convaincre que celui que les avait réalisées avait un message d'importance à faire parvenir, qu'il était en possession d'un secret."

⁵ Since spirits manifest themselves through people, no statues or pictures are needed. Use is made during ceremonies of symbolic drawings, called Vevé. Depending on the spirit, these designs are drawn on the ground with wheat, maize flour, crushed birch, coffee grounds or ash. The priest takes a pinch of powder from a bowl and outlines geometric figures, objects or animals. Originally it was

westernized language of devotion to images. This is the case of *The Great Master* (1946 – 1948), the man with two noses, which is the representation of the chief god of the Voodoo pantheon, an image without precedent in Haitian art. Breton recognised this as one of Hyppolite's major inputs. "Hector Hyppolite's painting gives us I think, the first representations that have been provided of divinities and voodoo scenes. For this reason alone, as early religious painting, it presents itself already of considerable interest."⁶

In the last year of the artist's life, he was no longer actively practicing as a *houngan*, although his home was filled with animistic altars and magical paraphernalia. He claimed: "I asked the spirits' permission to suspend my work . . . because of my painting. . . . I've always been a priest, just like my father and grandfather, but now I'm more an artist than a priest."

Beyond his condition as a priest and an artist Hyppolite was an inspiring figure for the generation to come in the arts of the Caribbean in so far as he represented what was considered and authentic Afro-American identity. He was considered an important cornerstone by the Indigenist movement (1927 – 1944) in Haiti a nationalist affirmation in reaction to the American occupation. It is difficult to sustain that Hyppolite's art was influenced by the revaluation of Voodoo and African derived cultural practices in general, however it is important to point out that it coincided with publications like *Ainsi parla l'oncle* (1928) by Jean Price-Mars similar in the effect it had on the "academic" public raising awareness of the richness of African culture in Latin America. With Hyppolite Afro-Haitian culture was a wealth and not something to hide, black man was no longer viewed in relation to the Caucasian but as a being carrying a wealth inside himself.

thought that the Vevé came from the Tainos but it has now been established that it is manifestation from the culture of the Congo in Africa. It is on these drawings that offerings and the bodies of sacrificed animals are placed. They also possess the magic power of attracting the spirits.

⁶ *ibid.* "La peinture d'Hector Hyppolite apporte, je pense, les premières représentations qui aient été fournies de divinités et de scènes vaudou. A ce titre seul, en tant que peinture religieuse primitive, elle présenterait déjà un intérêt considérable. »

Wifredo Lam (1902 – 1982)

Wifredo Oscar de la Concepción Lam y Castillo was born in Cuba in 1902. His father was a Chinese salesman who lived in Cuba and his mother was *mulata*.⁷ Thus he inherited a mixture of Negro, Chinese and Spanish culture, a situation that he managed to transform into a source of inspiration. In 1923 Lam travelled to Europe where he remained, living between Madrid and Paris for fourteen years.

On his return to Cuba, between 1942 and 1947, at a time called by Lam “the jungle period”⁸, Lam created an ‘untranslatable language’. It could not be understood solely under the European parameters of Surrealism or Cubism; neither could it be reduced to the Afro-Cuban identity discourse that had taken shape in the visual arts as a sort of ‘doudouism’; that is ‘colourful art’ made to meet the expectations of the tourists. In that sense, it was a language of rebellion that he kept on developing throughout his life, struggling not to be caught in the stereotype.

Lam did not lament the loss of a pristine past and neither did he want to be European. He wanted to achieve a language to describe the mixture of cultures that led Cuba to where it was in the 1940’s. He momentarily “stabilised and represented” the dynamic process of transculturation. For Lam the greatest mistake of Western civilisation, was to have separated, in accordance with exaggerated and arbitrary notions of quality, the so-called primitive arts from those of supposedly mature civilisations.

In his work he showed interest in the subject of cultural contact in paintings like “Présence éternelle” (1945). In it he portrays on the left a mulatto woman with two mouths, symbol of the colonial *métissage* of the tropics and the West; and on the right a character representing Africa. Both of these characters are brought together in what seems to be a ceremonial space.

⁷ A mix between African black and Spanish.

⁸ That is how Lam refer to this period in the letters to the Bergman family, collectors of his work.

Wifredo Lam and “La cosa Negra”

Lam called it “La cosa negra” (“the black thing”). It was a term representing one of his main sources of interest that would reach its highest expression in the creation of his painting *The Jungle*. With it, Lam starts a period of fusion of two important sources in his creative life. First his interest in black sculpture awakened by his acquaintances in the European Avant-garde and second an exploration of his Afro-Cuban origin.

In 1938 Lam met Pablo Picasso, an artist who was to have great influence over his work and whose ideas were revolutionary for the young Cuban. According to Lam what attracted him in Picasso’s painting was: “the presence of African art and the African spirit that I discovered in it. When I was a little boy, I had seen African figures in Mantonica Wilson’s (his godmother) house. And in Pablo’s work I seemed to find a sort of *continuity*.”⁹ What Lam admired in Picasso was the irruption of African art into the European avant-garde. With him traditional norms of perception, as well as the representation of reality and the interrelation between objects and man, had been questioned. Lam found in Picasso’s Cubism “a sense of the metamorphoses of form which was nothing if not liberating.”¹⁰

It has been argued that Lam, belonging to a Black culture, would necessarily create from within it.¹¹ If it is true that Lam’s positioning as ‘insider’ in Afro-Cuba culture represented for him an advantage, allowing him to appropriate the black beyond its surface, Lam was not a nationalist but a humanist “La cosa negra” was most certainly not restricted to the black culture of Cuba for Lam. One example is the long limbs and the shape of hands and feet of the characters in *The Jungle*. He also incorporated elements from masks from the Ivory Coast. See, for example, the incorporation of the Baule mask in *Les Yeux de la grille*. Lam acknowledged the nature of his debt to primitive art, when referring to the Baule mask in his collection, he exclaimed, “You

⁹ Lam quoted in Fouchet, (1986) p.23

¹⁰ Fouchet, (1986) p.26

¹¹ See for instance Mosquera (1992) or Carpentier (1944)

see –I have spontaneously recovered the forms! They have revived in me like an ancestral reminiscence!”¹²

Lam’s ‘ancestral reminiscence’, his Afro-Cuban roots, were first embodied in his godmother Mantonica Wilson, a priestess in the Santería tradition. Although this background was a source of inspiration, providing him with hallucinatory images of divinities and fantastical beings, it was never his aim to depict it as a static phenomenon but rather to show its metamorphic and dynamic nature. Santería, for Lam, did not represent an exotic source of fantastic figures, the influence of it in his work consisted in his being conscious of other ‘realities’ or other ‘levels’ of reality that were not evident to everyone. His childhood memories about his reflection in the mirror being two headed act as a metaphor of his preoccupation for this “other” existing within himself.

It is clear that Wifredo Lam’s godmother had a strong influence on him - especially in the fact that being a priestess would allow her, according to Santería belief, to unveil certain parallel realities to her godson. This would make of the spiritual something natural. It is also highly possible that she would have initiated Lam in to the ‘magic’ hidden in plants, an aspect that was to take great dimensions in his work.

Lam was not alone in his quest to revalue African culture in Cuba a group of intellectuals was actively exploring Afro-Cuban¹³ history, Folklore, literature, music and dance. Apart from the influence of Fernando Ortiz’s anthropological research, Lam found on his return the effects of the Afro-Cuban literary movement (1928-1938) still strong. He became connected with this circle of Cuban intellectuals through folklorist Lydia Cabrera and writer Alejo Carpentier; the three of them had spent time in Europe and were influenced by the interest in African art.¹⁴

When Lam met Cabrera in 1941 she was researching the myths, religious beliefs and practices, and folkways of Afro-Cubans of diverse origin. Her research recording oral

¹² Lam quoted in William Rubin ed., *Primitivism in 20th Century Art* (New York: the Museum of Modern Art 1985), p.580

¹³ This term was introduced in the 1910 decade by Fernando Ortiz

¹⁴ Lam met Carpentier in Madrid in the early 1930s

traditions of Cuba must have had an impact on Lam. She gave titles to most of Lam's paintings produced during that period of time based on her research, for instance *Le Sombre de Malembo* (1943) (illustration). Cabrera was also one of the first critics to write about Lam's work and her first aim was to state its seriousness and distinguish it from the "commercial art" made simply to satisfy the interest in, and demand for, African art. "His work was not 'exotic' or 'vulgar' in the commonly understood meaning of the words - for Lam was a trained artist whose work was not to be confused with commercial art."¹⁵ In a second article Cabrera elaborated more on the Afro-Cuban iconology. "The ancient ancestral black deities [...] appeared tangible to him in Cuba where they are expressed in each corner of the landscape, in each tree-divinity, in each fabulous leaf of his garden in Buen Retiro."¹⁶

From their own perspectives both Hyppolite's and Lam's work revindicated the ancestral African spiritual practices and claimed them for the development of the Visual Arts in the Caribbean. Hyppolite achieved this unknowingly insofar as the practice of his vocation as priest translated into his artistic practice and as he played the role of an emblematic figure for the generations to come. On the other hand, Lam, conscious of the intention of his struggle, made use of his spiritual initiation to highlight the importance of the African cultural inheritance.

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¹⁵ Lydia Cabrera, "Wifredo Lam", *Diario de la Marina*, may 17, 1943

¹⁶ Lydia Cabrera, "Wifredo Lam", *Diario de la Marina*, June 30, 1944