

Critical Humanities

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Introduction

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Brief Note

Welcome to the second issue of *Critical Humanities*. The goal when Founding Editor Puspa Damai created *Critical Humanities* was to broaden the conversation around the Global South, and to invite into that conversation diverse voices which could complicate and enrich this concept. In the first issue, this effort was organized around the theme of *pandemic*.

This issue, though not directly themed, is threaded by a rejection of the hegemonic apparatuses that strive to define and diminish the possibilities of identity, community, and individual agency. Articles, book reviews, and interviews cover a wide array of considerations—Guyanese democracy, post-9/11 Arab American Identity, Nepali-Indian representation, hyphenated identities and Queer Appalachia—and through these topics examine how communities negotiate and thrive within oppressive politics and class systems utilizing philosophy, story, and civil movements. Our issue's nonfiction and poetry serve as an emotional ballast too—a reminder that no matter what, art is necessary.

¹ Lam, Wilfredo. Gouache on paper on canvas. *The Jungle (La Jungla) 1943*. MoMA.org https://www.moma.org/collection/works/34666?artist_id=3349&page=1&sov_referrer=artist

The necessity of art is paramount—hybridized, transnational and cross-cultural identities express a new understanding of themselves through art's ability to synthesize seemingly disparate elements of the individual or culture. This is well represented in the works of Cuban-born, with Chinese and Afro-Spanish descent, surrealist painter Wilfredo Lam. An ekphrasis on Lam's [*La Jungla*](#) (1943)¹ as a visual representation of this issue's examination of identity feels apt. As art critic John Berger says,

We are nevertheless in front of paintings, not arguments... With words we cannot get nearer to them than a map can get to a landscape. We can enter them only with our eyes. Once within them, the eyes may tell the skin something. Once within, the eyes may see even with eyelids shut.²

Internalizing the spiritual and emotional message at which Berger hints is text for Lam's artistic objective. In a famous interview with French poet Max-Pol Fouchet, Lam confides,

I wanted with all my heart to paint the drama of my country, but by thoroughly expressing the negro [*sic*] spirit, the beauty of the plastic art of the blacks. In this way I could act as a

² Berger, John. *Portraits*. London: Verso, 2015 (2021), (424)

Trojan horse that would spew forth hallucinating figures with the power to surprise, to disturb the dreams of the exploiters.³

Last year, for his 120th birthday, The National Museum of Fine Arts opened the retrospective exhibit *Wilfredo Lam Indivisible*.⁴ The word *indivisible* is loaded, indicating that Lam's art serves as a refusal of liminality and fragmentation, and that by hybridizing Surrealism and Cubism, in invention, a new reality is born, that *every viewpoint* and *all viewpoints*—a polymorph identity—can be experienced all at once with gouache on craft paper.

Lam, in describing elements of *La Jungla* notes that “[t]he scissors mean that it was necessary for us to sever ourselves from the culture of colonialism...My painting is an act of decolonization (*un acto de descolonización*) not in a physical sense, but in a mental one.”⁵

This issue of *Critical Humanities*, and all issues going forward, are scissors used to sever what is vestigial and necrotic. In so doing, the critical debates and discussions here clear the way for something new and vital.

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³ Richards, Paulette, “Wilfredo Lam: A Sketch.” *Callaloo* 11:1 (90-92)

⁴ Nórdo, Yuris. trans. Sergio Paneque Díaz. “Wilfredo Lam: unique, iconic, integral.” *Cubasí*. Dec. 13, 2022.

⁵ My Painting is an Act of Decolonization an Interview with Wilfredo Lam by Gerado Mosquera (1980). *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas*, 3: 1-2 (2009), 1-8