

# BILL HODGES GALLERY

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## Wifredo Lam + Agustín Cárdenas

9 September – 5 November 2021

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Bill Hodges Gallery is honored to present *Wifredo Lam + Agustín Cárdenas*, an exhibition celebrating two exceptional Afro-Cuban artists. This exhibition focuses on latter artistic periods of both Lam and Cárdenas in order to illuminate the ethos of each artist at a time when they were making works marked by a profound sense of self-exploration.



Wifredo Lam, *Untitled*, 1975, Oil on Canvas  
9 ½ x 13 ¾ in. (24.1 x 35.9 cm)

As Cubans of African descent and as artists, **Lam (Sagua La Grande, Cuba; 1902 - Paris, France; 1982)** and **Cárdenas (Matanzas, Cuba; 1927 – Havana, Cuba; 2001)** uplifted and transformed the histories of Africa, Cuba and beyond towards a universal future that did not seek to extricate itself from the present or past. Comparable to the rhizome of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (further developed by Édouard Glissant) – both artists employed the ancestral, terrestrial and the divine to establish and elevate infinite truths in a one-sided world.

Born in 1902, Lam was the eighth and youngest child to Ana Serafina Lam and Lam Yam. The artist was of Chinese descent on his father’s side and of African and Spanish descent on his mother’s side. His ancestry is a stark reflection of Cuba’s history of servitude and slavery – a practice that was abolished less than twenty years before the artist’s birth. Because of the country’s enmeshed histories, especially that between Africa and Cuba, many Afro-Cubans were forced to duplicitously retain and remodel aspects of their indigenous cultures and religion through oral tradition. This is seen, distinctly, in the spiritual practice of Santería. Lam’s godmother, Mantonica Wilson, was a locally revered santera (Santería priestess) who exposed him to this sacred tradition from an early age. Though Lam did not feel he was chosen to become a babalao (priest) in his youth, he eventually reconnected with the religion later in his career by using Santería imagery, as evidenced in many works in this exhibition.

Wifredo Lam’s earlier styles were influenced by his time living and traveling throughout Spain and France and also by the artists he was able to form relationships with, such as Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso. However, after World War II and frequent trips back to Cuba – Lam, forced to reckon with the relentless state of racism in his homeland and beyond, chose to dedicate his craft to portraying the beauty and spirit of Black people and culture. The exhibition *Wifredo Lam + Agustín Cárdenas* features many works by Lam that reference his connection to Santería and Afro-Cuba, namely his caricature of the “horse-headed woman” or *femme cheval*. *Femme cheval* is a motif taken directly from Santería meant to represent a santera/babalao who has been possessed, or in other words “ridden”, by an orisha (deity or spirit). Though many of these works were created while the artist was living in France or Italy, his reference to Santería serves as a linkage to his motherland and heritage and, more adroitly, as an opposition to European culture. Examples of *femme cheval* in this exhibition can be seen in his intimate sketch for a friend titled *Horse Woman on the Chair*, 1951 and in the oil on canvas work from 1975 featured above.

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Though Wifredo Lam and Agustín Cárdenas attended the same prestigious art school in Havana, Cuba; were the most prominent Afro-Cuban visual artists in Europe of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and were both heralded in the Surrealist movement, most notably by the movement's founder André Breton – there was a significant age difference between the two men that likely prevented much imbrication. Cárdenas was born some 170 kilometers away and 25 years after Lam in 1927, Matanzas, Cuba. Matanzas is the heart of Afro-Cuban culture and was a port town during the island's slave-driven sugar economy. Cárdenas was the descendant of Congolese and Senegalese slaves and often referenced and explored his African parentage through his medium. From 1943 to 1949, Cárdenas studied under celebrated Cuban sculptor Juan José Sicre at Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes, San Alejandro in Havana and left for Paris, where he would eventually settle for most of his life, in 1955. In Paris, he was embraced and befriended by artists like Constantin Brâncuși, Salvador Dalí and most notably by André Breton, who later organized Cárdenas' second solo exhibition at Galerie de la Cour d'Ingres in 1959 (Cárdenas' first solo exhibition was at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Havana in 1955).

Cárdenas' style is generally characterized by his transformation of dense, rough natural materials into biomorphic forms. Without ever being overtly figurative or sensual, Cárdenas' sculptures straddled the line between carnal familiarity and alien prurience. Cárdenas' oeuvre is typically divided into three distinct periods: the first being his totem period (1951-1964) that marked his transition from Cuba to Paris and an exploration of African art. These totem works were inspired by the Dogon totems of West Africa (more specifically modern-day Mali and Burkina Faso) and can be seen in the ten foot tall sculpture *Elle*, 1964 featured in this exhibition as well as in the undated ink wash on paper pictured to the right.



Agustín Cárdenas, *Untitled*,  
Ink Wash on Paper  
31 x 22 ½ in. (78.7 x 57.2 cm)

Works from Cárdenas' second distinct period, which lasted from 1965-1982, can also be seen in this exhibition. This era is marked by Cárdenas creating sculptures out of marble that he would mine in Carrara, Italy like the work *Tête*, 1965 featured in this exhibition. *Tête* is a prime example of Cárdenas' talent for using familiar, corporeal shapes and repurposing them for abstraction – siphoning away their earthly connotation and leaving only the fundamental beauty of form.

We are also fortunate to be able to share a number of Cárdenas' works on paper as they provide incredible insight into his process and also the bounds of his imagination. The 1973 work on paper featured in this exhibition is simple in form and lacks dimension but still embodies Cárdenas' loose interpretation of and adherence to shape while the work on paper *Sculpture Project*, 1978 also featured in this exhibition, shows the beauty and limitlessness of sculpture freed from the reins of physics and proportion.

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**Established in 1979, Bill Hodges Gallery** is a modern and contemporary art gallery specializing in influential artists of the African diaspora. The gallery's collection is well known for its strong inventory of works from the Harlem Renaissance and Abstract Expressionist movement by prominent artists including Norman Lewis (1909-1979), Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000), Romare Bearden (1911-1988), Sam Gilliam (1933), Wifredo Lam (1902-1982) and Agustín Cárdenas (1927-2001). Responding to market and scholarly interest in artists who are underrepresented in the canon of art history, the gallery advocates for their status as leading artistic pioneers of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The gallery is located at **529 West 20th Street, suite #10E, New York, NY 10011** between 10th Avenue and 11th Avenue. Our closest subway stations are 14th St. & 8th Ave. (A-C-E) and 23rd St. & 8th Ave. (C-E). We are open Tuesday to Friday from 11 AM – 6 PM and Saturday 12:30 – 5:30 PM and kindly ask that guests wear appropriate personal protection equipment. Masks and hand sanitizer can be provided. For more information or to arrange a private viewing, please contact Bill or Navindren Hodges at (212) 333-2640 or at [info@billhodgesgallery.com](mailto:info@billhodgesgallery.com).