

The Blue Mano, 2009

gouache & charcoal on amate paper
46 x 23 in
by Carlos Luna

close-up by Susan Gresto - November 26, 2018

Tucked away in a corner of the mesoamerican section of the PSAM mezzanine, is the painting *The Blue Mano*. This bold graphic piece is a **gouache** and charcoal work on **amate** paper* which bursts beyond the border of its traditional frame, emphatically repeating its subject directly painted on the museum wall. It is a bright blue, heavily outlined, figurative and symbolic piece. *The Blue Mano* was created in 2009 by artist Carlos Luna and gifted to PSAM by Heather Sacre and James Carona. This gift coincided with Luna's exhibition at the Heather James Gallery in Palm Desert, "Los Decorados," in 2011.



Carlos Luna was born in Cuba in 1969 and received his formal art training in his country of origin. Beginning his art education at a young age, he enrolled in the School of Visual Arts in 1980 and continued in the following years at the prestigious (and the oldest in Cuba) Academia de San Alejandro, the National School of Arts in Havana, and finally, completed his education in 1991 at the Visual Arts College also in Havana. During this period of his life, Luna was inspired by a wide variety of artists and styles. The Cubism of Picasso, Afro-Cuban style of Wifredo Lam, Rufino Tamayo's mural art, Fernand Leger's "tubular" style, and even the Pop Art of Keith Haring, are said to have influenced his work.

Luna identified with the Art of the 80s movement which was a Cuban government-denounced group of artists who created politically charged work. According to Curtis L. Carter, because Luna desired freedom of expression and liberation from the watchful eye of the Cuban government, he moved to Puebla, Mexico where he spent the next several years experimenting with the materials and traditions of the Talavera culture. It is during this period (1991-2002), Luna continued his experimentation with amate paper, typical to the region and produced from the amate (wild fig), nettle or mulberry plants. Additionally, the Talavera style of ceramics stimulated him to broaden his body of work. In 2001, Luna received a United States Visa for Extraordinary Ability which prompted his immigration to the states with his wife and three children in 2002 and is now settled in Miami.

As can be seen in *The Blue Mano*, Luna brilliantly assimilates his creative training, cultural and artistic influences into a style that is uniquely his own. It is contemporary yet familiar all at once. Carol Damian, Professor of Art History at Florida University, likens Luna's style to

* art terms in bold type defined on p. 3

the “over-patterned, over-worked **Baroque aesthetic**, re-interpreted in contemporary terms.” Additionally, his work is appealing because the curious figures, icons, and symbols he uses lend themselves to a lively narrative and can be related to the ever-popular graphic novel.

This strange, ultramarine-blue man looks as if he emerged from the pages of a current comic book, yet the amate paper he is painted on was used in pre-hispanic history. He thrusts out his palm which has a large eye in its center. Is he warning us that we are seen by some larger entity (the Communist regime) and to keep a safe distance, or more positively, extending protection and blessing (as symbolized in many world religions)? Luna then draws even more attention to this focal point with the white stenciled words THE BLUE MANO (the blue hand). He uses shapes to form this man's body that are both round (organic) and angular (geometric/structural), revealing what looks to be his clothing and inner workings of his skeleton and muscles. Nothing is hidden. All at once, we are able to view the interior and exterior of the man and there is an intense energy about him.

Who is this man with the blue mano? Is it a self-portrait of the artist who is said to incorporate himself and family members in his work? Luna's wife, Camila, describes him as “intense in everything he does” and this is decidedly an example of that energy and emotion. This figure might also be an inspired character from one of the many improvised folk songs Luna's parents and grandparents used to sing when he was a child or a *guajiro* (important symbolic male figure of Cuban farming and agriculture). In a 2016 Carlos Luna documentary, Luna shares that he has tremendous pride in his origins and that is reflected in his subject matter. Everything from family members, folk songs, even the decorative wallpaper of his childhood - finds its way into his work and even onto the wall surrounding it.

We may come up with a variety of theories of understanding *The Blue Mano* given the artist's background and our personal interaction with the piece, however, Luna has shared some specific clues to its meaning when interviewed by PSAM docent, Marny Shuster in 2015. The triptych created by using three pieces of amate paper is meant to communicate the three stages of life - the child, the adult and the elder. The multiple sets of eyes have meaning as well. Those positioned at the crown reflect self-awareness and understanding (inner-world). Those naturally positioned are purposed for observing and determining one's path in the outer-world. According to Luna, most importantly, the eye in the palm of the outstretched hand communicates, “I have looked at myself and I have made peace with myself. I understand who I am. Now, I am looking at you, challenging you to also look inside yourself.”

Despite *The Blue Mano's* bid for attention with a bizarre blue man's raised hands and numerous eyes, I was surprised to find that many of my colleagues at the museum were unfamiliar with it and this motivated me all the more to do some research and share my findings. Its placement in the mesoamerican section of the museum most probably is connected to the artist's origin, however, it is in a corner that can easily be over-looked. It is possible the location was most conducive to its permanency with Luna's extended painting on the museum wall. Whatever the reasoning may be, I encourage my colleagues and museum visitors to stop off on the mezzanine to visit this mysterious blue man and contemplate his message.

Art terms:

gouache - a paint similar to watercolor yet modified to make it opaque

amate - paper made from the amate (wild-fig), nettle or mulberry plant, used historically by the Aztecs and other peoples for religious and legal manuscripts.

Baroque aesthetic - a 17th century cultural movement in the arts and architecture which was exemplified by drama, complexity, extravagance and lavish decoration.

Sources referenced:

1. <https://www.heatherjames.com/artist-intro/?at=carlosluna>
2. <http://carlosluna.com> (bio and Carlos Luna Documentary video 2016)
3. http://artdaily.com/news/44277/Stunning-Installation-of-New-Oil-Paintings-by-Carlos-Luna-at-Heather-James-Fine-Art-#.W_wGJS_MxBw
4. "Carlos Luna - Cuban Artist" by Maureen Boren, February 2012
5. "Carlos Luna: Cuban Artist at the Crossroads" by Curtis L. Carter, July 2008
6. "Spotlight: Carlos Luna - Blue Mano" by Marny Shuster, April 2012
7. Carlos Luna, p. 43, 5 Continents Editions, Milan, Italy, July 2017

For a list of museums and public collections by Carlos Luna please visit his website:

<http://carlosluna.com/biography>

Locally, you may find Luna's *War-Giro*, in the sculpture garden at the Museum of Latin American Art (MOLAA) in Long Beach, CA. It is an excellent sculptural representation of Luna's figurative work seen in *The Blue Mano*. A few years ago, I had visited this museum and remember the sculpture in particular because his front side was a dressed man, but his back side revealed his skeleton. I enjoyed being able to connect this much earlier "Luna sighting" now that I'm acquainted with *The Blue Mano* and more of Luna's background as an artist.

