

Beaumont art museum presents exhibit of miniatures

By Andy Coughlan
CONTRIBUTOR

“We can do no great things — only small things with great love.” If Mother Teresa had seen the Mexican miniatures, she may have amended the “great things” part of her quote.

“Mundos Pequeños: Miniatures from the John Gaston Fairey Collection of Mexican Folk Art,” is on display at the Art Museum of Southeast Texas through Sept. 15.

This is the latest exhibition featuring work from the collection donated to the museum in 2017 by Fairey, following on from previous exhibitions by Carlomagno Pedro Martínez and Angélica Vasquez Cruz, among others.

The collection features artists and craftsmen predominantly from the Oaxaca region of Mexico and there seems to be a pattern of obsessive detail in much of the work. Curator Caitlin Clay has embraced the theme to focus on works that are absorbing to look at.

“Mundos Pequeños” translates to “Small Worlds,” and while the pieces are literally small, they contain the breadth of humanity and everyday existence. The miniature sizes belies their grand scale.

“Mexican Dancers and Biblical Scenes Tree of Life,” by Simon Castro Hernandez is a free-standing polychrome clay construction that is teeming with activity. The multi-level structure features angels and animals, with Adam and Eve on the base level. The Nativity is located at the center of what feels like a colorful Mexican celebratory festival.

Flowers and leaves bloom from every part of the sculpture and the figures dance and play instruments. As well as examining the stories depicted, one cannot help but marvel at the workmanship. How many hours must have been spent crafting each of the tiny individual pieces?

Another polychromed clay sculpture is “Garden of Eden Tree of Life” by an unknown artist. It is more formally structured but no less detailed. Plants and flowers circle an opening wherein stand Adam and Eve separated by the serpent lounging on a silhouetted tree. God with his arms extended is at the top of the



“Blue Niche with Relics” by Rafael Alvarez Diaz.



“Mexican Dancers and Biblical Scenes Tree of Life,” by Simon Castro Hernandez.

sculpture flanked by angels. At the bottom, striking for its brightness, is an open prickly pear flower that would not be out of place in a Georgia O’Keefe painting. The prickly pear is the Mexican equivalent of the apple of temptation perhaps.

In the small fold out display box, “Blue Niche with Relics” by Rafael Alvarez Diaz, one imagines a stall at the street market overflowing with objects. A woman looks out at us imploring us to buy either the relics that hang behind her or

the flowers that sit in front. The mixed media piece incorporates plastic crystals and cutout pictures. Once again, it is the sheer volume of items in such a small space that impresses.

Not all the miniatures incorporate tiny figures. One of the larger pieces is “Small Devil Mask with Serpents in the Mouth” by an unknown artist. The piece resembles a Japanese Oni mask but with characteristic Mexican bright coloring. The four snakes that coil around the head are exquisitely



Photos by Andy Coughlan/Beaumont Enterprise

An installation photo of “Mundos Pequeños” at the Art Museum of Southeast Texas through Sept. 15.



“Garden of Eden Tree of Life.”

detailed. The patterns stand out against the flat colors of the head itself. The mask has large canine teeth and wide blue eyes and a smile which makes it both frightening and comical.

“Mundos Pequeños” is a wonderfully whimsical exhibition and the pieces are exhibited low down which is perfect to introduce the work to children.

The Art Museum of Southeast Texas is located at 500 Main St. in Beaumont. For more visit amset.org.



“Small Devil Mask with Serpents in the Mouth.”

Your blue orchid likely isn't actually blue

By John Green
CERTIFIED TEXAS EXPERT
GARDENER

Orchids are a fascinating family of plants with more than 28,000 species that are grouped into hundreds of genera. The color palette of orchids is a literal rainbow of colors, which include red, pink, white, green, purple, orange, white and by far the rarest of orchid colors, blue. The only color missing from the color kaleidoscope is black.

Several years ago, I decided to explore the realm of orchids by diving in headfirst, purchasing several orchids in an array of colors and different genera. They arrived from several online merchants in pristine condition with remarkable appearance at the height of inflorescence that lasted for many weeks. Naturally, I knew nothing of orchids, convincing myself I would learn growth and species specific handling requirements while they provided their aesthetic, seated in the kitchens' windowsill. They each flourished, and once the blooms faded, the bloom spikes were each cut back to viable nodes, the plants were fertilized with diluted fertilizer weekly. The idea was to coax them to begin another inflorescence cycle. It worked for each of the six orchids, as they began developing new flower spikes and grew flower buds. Once the blooms started



Courtesy photo

Phalaenopsis orchid or moth orchid is a very easy and rewarding orchid to grow.

opening, my enthusiasm increased — especially while waiting for one Phalaenopsis orchid, as it demonstrated a beautiful Mediterranean blue color known as Waterfall. Imagine my surprise as I was completely astonished (and dismayed) as the initial bloom of the second flush was pale yellow in color? How can this be possible, I thought? Did I incorrectly label each plant? After each Phalaenopsis orchid marker was checked and re-checked, more in-depth research detailed the issue of the miracle orchid that changed color. I absolutely had to understand how this Phalaenopsis phenomenon occurred. The short answer is that it was

not a spectacle at all but rather a clever and unfortunately common industry practice, which as a beginner orchid grower, I was not privy to!

Phalaenopsis come in a variety of gorgeous colors and are reasonably priced and readily available. For me, the most striking color is Waterfall blue, which has captivating and stunning flowers. What this gardener did not understand is that blue orchids receive a bit of human intervention to create this color. There is no such color variety as a Blue Moth orchid.

At this point, you may ask yourself, “If blue orchids are rare, how are they readily available?” As with everything

touched by mankind, the answer is ambiguous. The physical orchid plant is real and exists in nature, yet the blue color does not exist naturally. How clever it is that Phalaenopsis orchids are expertly dyed by cultivators using a patented process, in effect tricking buyers (me included) into purchasing a plant that has been adulterated and is not a true specimen. Gardeners, I’m certain you have seen these magnificent orchids at large, local retailers listed for a reasonable price.

Fewer than 10% of blooming plants provide blue flowers. Blue orchids do exist in nature, but they are an extremely rare occurrence, making them difficult to locate and costly. The issue becomes even more convoluted as merchants often claim that there are true blue orchids, such as Vandas, which to me appear mostly purple. When searching online, posted images that are supposed to depict blue orchids are clearly purple.

Tricks of the Trade

Orchid cultivators utilize differing methods to create blue Phalaenopsis orchids. One grower “Just Add Ice” uses a patented process to create blue orchids in their Watercolor Orchids line. In my opinion, this is unfortunate, since they also use dye to create green, orange and hot pink flowers. The steps to create blue

orchids is similar in that a blue dye is injected into a small hole created at the base of the orchids flower spike. The hole is then covered with wax to seal the stem and maintain a barrier against pathogens. The dye begins affecting the flower’s base color, which is usually white or pale yellow, within 24 hours.

Second Round Inflorescence - Surprise!

As stated earlier, Surprise! Unfortunately, the second and subsequent blooms will never result in blue flowers. The orchid will return to the original color the flowers were before being dyed. In many cases, white or pale yellow orchids are used. So, when your orchid reblooms for you, the new blooms will not be blue. This is important to understand so you’re not disappointed.

Gardeners, let me share my experience since I reached out to online merchants, who agreed that the blue orchids that I purchased didn’t provide clarity in the description, meaning my purchase was refunded. Know before you buy!

So long for now fellow gardeners! Let’s go out and grow ourselves a greener, more sustainable world, one plant at a time! Thank you for the questions and kind comments. Please continue sending gardening questions to jongreene57@gmail.com.