

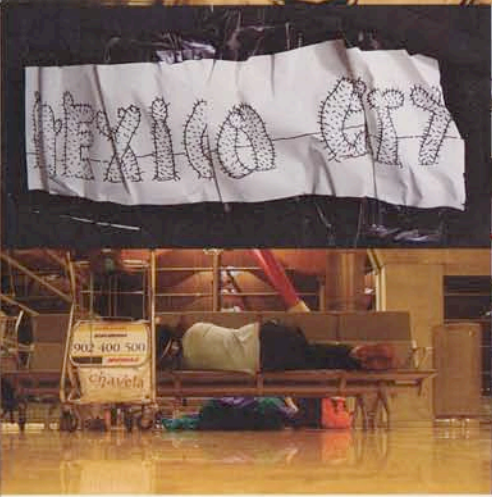
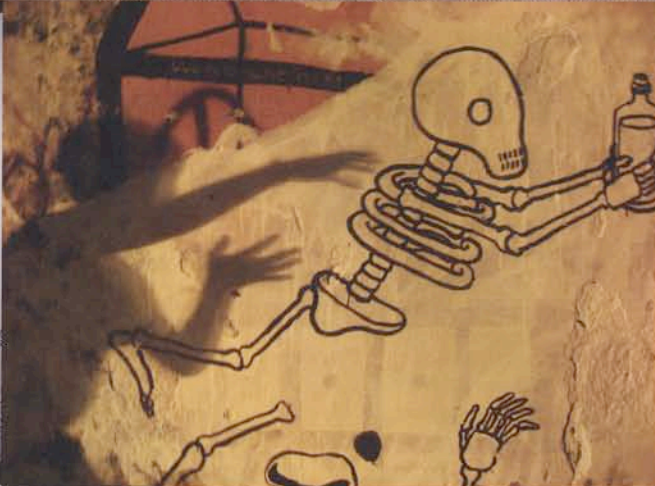


**A STREET ARTIST FROM BOLOGNA
CONQUERS THE NEW WORLD
WITH BRUSHES AND A FILM CREW.
BY JAMES GADDY**

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GRAFITERO







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he locals in Managua, Nicaragua, didn't know what to make of the skinny Italian guy painting on the walls in their city. He hadn't been invited or commissioned, and his quirky images—a small yellow figure removing his own head, for instance—didn't follow the narrative tradition of greats like Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros. Still, a mural was cause for celebration. "Oh, wow, you're painting," they would say. "Good boy, good boy, keep on going. You want a lemonade?"

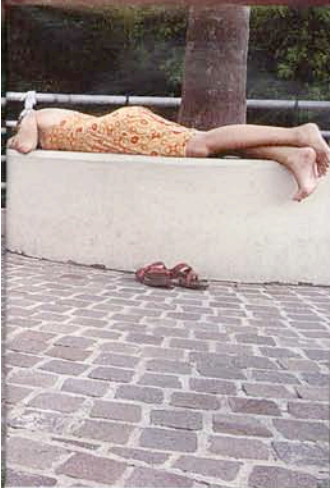
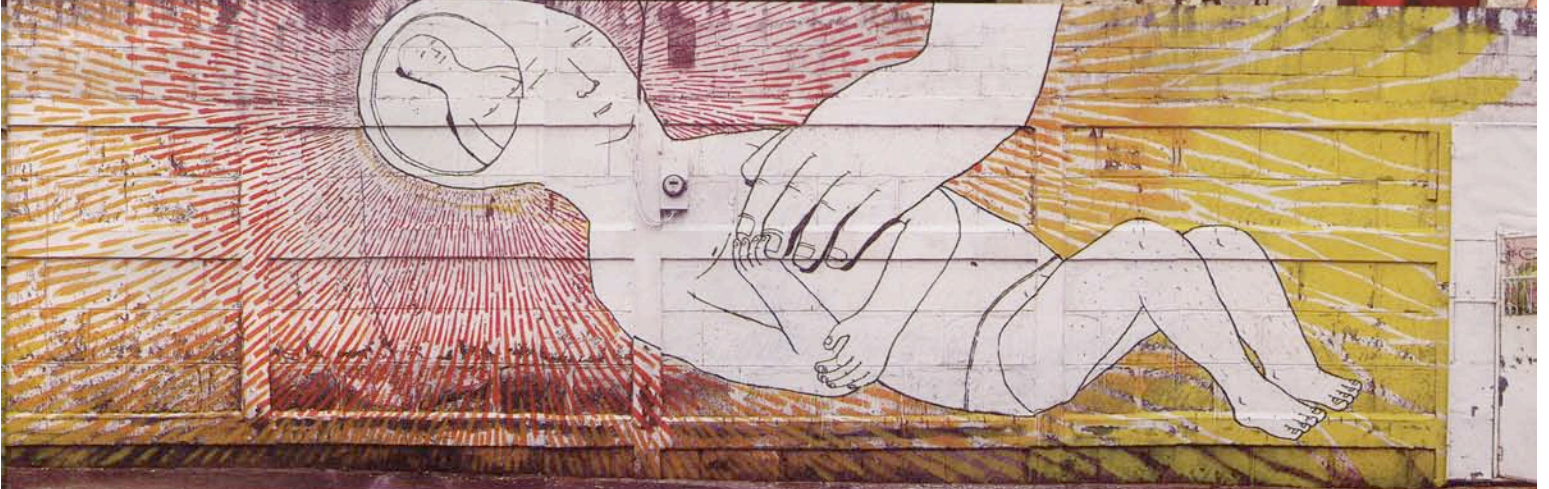
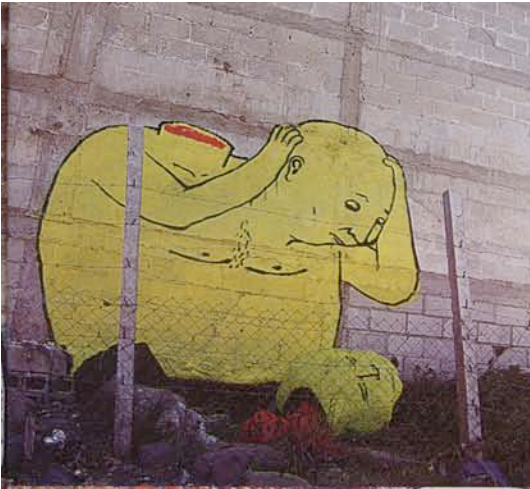
Blu's real name could get him arrested, and he rarely speaks to the press or allows anyone to take his picture. His aversion to publicity and penchant for painting on public surfaces are common traits among young graffiti artists around the world. But unlike most, what he paints changes every

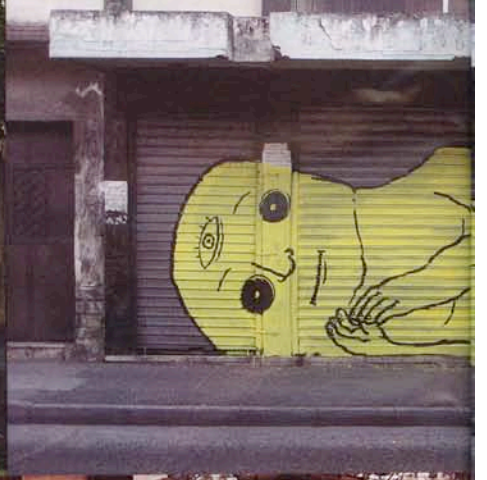
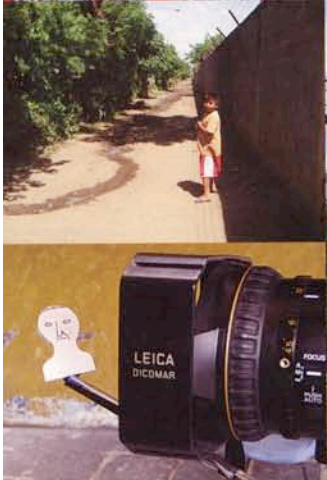
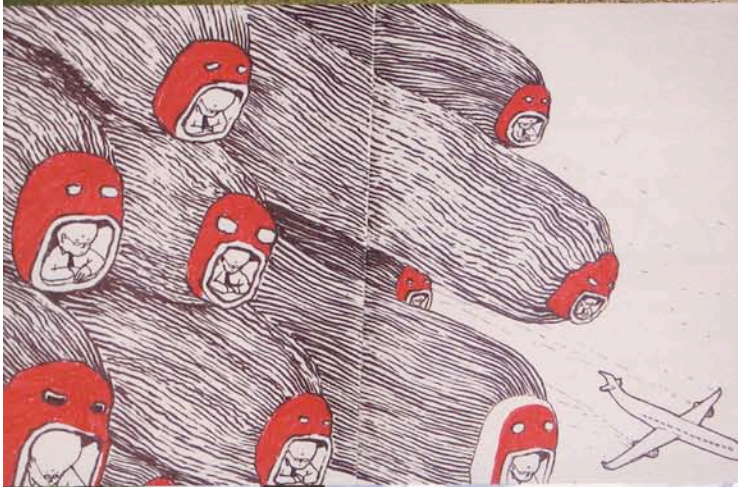
time he works; he's not extending his brand so much as responding to the places where he happens to be working.

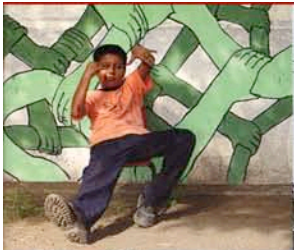
Lorenzo Fonda, a Milan-based artist and film director, met Blu two and a half years ago at a skateboarding contest in Bolzano, Italy. The two became friends and started playing what Fonda calls "illustration tennis" by e-mail: Fonda would draw something and send it to Blu, who would add to it, send it back, and so on. One day they got the idea of taking a trip through Central and South America to explore the effect those cultures would have on Blu's work, but they lacked the resources to make it happen. Then, during the summer of 2006, Mercurio Cinematografica, the Milan-based production company where Fonda works, agreed to fund a trip to make a documentary about Blu's street art. Blu dubbed the tour Megunica, an acronym of the countries they'd travel through—Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Argentina. One condition of the deal was that Blu's face would never be shown.

In late October, Fonda, producer Ivan Merlo, Blu, and Sibe, Blu's girlfriend, arrived in Mexico City with only a loose plan for where they'd be traveling and sleeping. Three days later, in the Guelatao barrio in the southern part of the city, Blu had already painted two figures: One, a male, smiles wryly, his face removed and the red musculature beneath the epidermal mask on grotesque display as he offers said mask to the other, more normal figure. Since he began working on the streets around 2000, Blu has evolved a style of showing the anatomy beneath the skin. A man may have the top of his head sliced off to reveal a cavernous space inside containing only









roads of Latin America, Blu's work took on a certain tenderness—if only for a moment. When the party later arrived in tourist-heavy regions of Costa Rica and Argentina, Blu returned to uneasier themes and scenarios.

After spending a few days on the Pacific Coast between Nicaragua and Costa Rica, which Merlo describes as "a sort of heaven on earth," they ended the trip in Buenos Aires. Blu is highly regarded among street artists, and there he used his fame to gain access to the best walls. Because his works can reach heights of 18 feet, he paints with brushes attached to long sticks or stands on a friend's shoulders. But for his last, four-story-high piece—in which a complex system of pulleys, gears, and hundreds of small figures are hard at work inside the head and body of giant reclining figure—he needed ladders.

Fonda says that Blu "always improvises," and by the time the trip was finished they had more than 80 hours of footage of such spontaneous moments. The result, titled *Megunica*, is scheduled to be released late fall. If the trailer is any indication, moviegoers are in for some madcap viewing. It pokes fun at the team's inexperience, revealing that they spent the first 21 days with the microphone plugged into the wrong outlet. But the filmmakers aren't too daft, or too cynical, to deliver a serious message. "The film is about inspiration," Fonda says, "and is an inspiration for people who see it to go and collect their own experiences themselves, to create more original stuff and make this world a little more beautiful." ■

For more information about the film and the artist, go to www.megunica.org and www.blubu.org.

tiny, wormlike creatures. Or his guts might be spilling out of his stomach, or that stomach might be replaced by bugs.

Without a car, the four took whatever transportation happened to be available (buses, boats, planes, taxis), which led to many unexpected adventures over the two-month trip. In Mexico they rode a bus out to the pyramids at Teotihuacán and Palenque and, Fonda says, "felt the magic of the place every step we took." Due to political strife, reaching the Guatemalan border was a challenge, and they were strongly advised to take a five-hour detour. From there, someone offered them a ride in the back of a truck, and later, unsure who was friend or foe, they took a boat—"probably one of the sketchiest rides we have taken in our lives," Fonda says—to the Guatemala shore of Rio San Pedro. There, they caught a bus filled with peasants, children, and one elderly woman who, every few miles, got sick into a little plastic bag she kept on the seat next to her, steadily filling it up.

In Guatemala City they met with members of Caja Lúdica, a group that teaches inner-city children ballet, painting, and other creative activities to keep them off the streets. In Managua Blu gave a workshop teaching stenciling to local kids, and the next day he went out to a meditation center and painted perhaps his most sensitive work: A giant hand reaches down from outside the frame and touches a man's chest in a gesture of protection. Here, on the back

