

Katherine Long  
Portraits  
May, 2008

**Frida Kahlo**  
**(1907-1954)**

Perhaps the most famous and recognizable self-portraits in existence are those of Frida Kahlo. She has gained the status of pop icon in recent years and during her lifetime she was known more for her character and relationship with Diego Rivera than for her art. But in this essay, I will aim to focus on the meaning and influences of her art, with an emphasis on her numerous self-portraits. Her portrayal of her own body was central to her work. Of the 143 paintings that she completed, 55 of them are considered self-portraits (Richmond, 25) and many others explore her identity in relation to her gender, nationality, and social standing, etc.

Kahlo's art has a distinct style and her influences are numerous. Much of her subject matter was autobiographical, and the fact that she painted her self with such frequency further supports that she was her own central subject. The stories she paints are personal, but on many levels universal. Kahlo's work is commonly understood as autobiographical, but she often uses her life metaphorically, or at least, many relate to her art because they see in it a resemblance to their own lives. (Winterson, 3). She used certain conventions of traditional portraiture. Among them is the implementation of scenery and objects to reveal something about the soul of the sitter. In addition to background objects, she tells a story with her body. The pain she suffers is a common thread of her work (Herrera 69,70). Before the feminist motto "The personal is political," she was publicizing the controversial truths about her body and her confined role as a female in Mexican society, as she was simultaneously making a general statement about the limitations of gender roles. Her work was innovative and powerful, and it was (and sometimes continues to be) undermined by her eventful life. J. Winterson makes the following statement about the lack of recognition given to female artists: "Creative women in the arts find themselves explained by, and reduced to, the circumstances of their lives in a way that men are not. Men, it is assumed, shape the world...women are shaped by their circumstances and from that, sometimes make art." (Winterson, 4).

Some of Kahlo's techniques were very conventional; She most frequently painted herself realistically from her torso up and with her face forward, yet, much of her

Katherine Long

Portraits

May, 2008

imagery she did not draw from Western art. Kahlo claimed that she was purely a spontaneous artist. As she once said,

“ I started to paint 12 years ago, during my convalescence from an accident which forced me to stay in bed for about a year. During all these years I have worked I have always worked following the spontaneous impulse of my feelings. I have never followed any school or worked under anyone’s influence, and I don’t expect anything from my work except for the feeling of satisfaction I get from painting itself and from being able to express things I cannot express in any other form.” (Richmond, 25).

She may draw from her instincts, but her art is so full of complicated symbolism and thought-out composition, that it’s hard to argue that all of her work is not constructed with determined intent. Much of her art also alludes to Mexican folk art, art of the Renaissance, and pre-Columbian art. (Darson, 120-124). She was not confined to the influence of one person, but she developed her own style that incorporated the varied artistic and cultural influences that composed her identity. Because her art is complex, understanding her life is crucial to understanding her art.

Kahlo was born in Coyacan, Mexico in 1907, just before the Mexican Revolution. Her mother was native to Mexico and her father was from Germany (Oles, 1). Her father’s profession as a photographer and his interest in German art influenced Kahlo. In addition to German art, she was also familiar with work of the masters, including Velazques, El Grecco, Leonardo da Vinci and Rembrandt. (Darson, 17). Kahlo’s artistic endeavors began when she was struck with polio when she was a child, leaving her bedridden and often alone for many months. Kahlo further developed her drawing skills when she became a professional engraver when she was a teenager. She then began painting scenes from her hometown with watercolors and eventually oil paints.

In 1925, when she was a young medical student, she was riding a bus that collided with a trolley. The accident crushed her pelvis and one of her legs, and also impaled her lower abdomen with a rail. (Monsivais, 30). She had thirty-two operations throughout her

Katherine Long

Portraits

May, 2008

lifetime and was never able to be physically active or bear children (Darson, 15). This accident would affect her life, and thus much of her art to come. While she was bedridden, the easiest subject for her to paint was her self. Soon after recovering, she drew and painted images of the accident. Her emotional and physical pain would show up in her work ever after. (Monsivai, 31). To Kahlo, painting was a way to exercise her pain and demons (Monsivais, 12). “To me, nothing seemed more normal than to paint what had not been fulfilled. My painting carries with it the message of pain...painting completed my life. I lost three children...painting substituted for all of this.” (Herrera, 75).

When she was nineteen, she completed her **Self Portrait With a Velvet Dress**



(1926). The influence of Renaissance masters is apparent with her Boticellian elongated neck and limbs, pale, smooth skin and European dress. (Monsivais, 32). In 1929 she met the muralist Diego Rivera, who would soon become her husband. His art and the Mexicanidad movement influenced her painting technique. The term Mexicanidad refers to a movement to reestablish Mexican pride and culture, including the revival of indigenous art. Some of her art was overtly political and expressive of her support of the Communist party. Her style

became more primitivist and more in alignment with Mexican folk-art. This shift was done to conceal sophistication—she denied the intellectual side of her art for many years. Primitivism also allowed her to portray gory and morbid images that would otherwise be too disturbing to look at. Her portraits became even more flat looking, which looked more primitive, but also showed the flatness of mirror images. Her style that often mimicked Mexican retablo paintings allowed the viewer to observe scenes from a distance (Castro-Sethress, 22). Kahlo was raised Catholic, and she used some Catholic symbolism and imagery. Among these were the retablo paintings, which were small, personal depictions of troublesome events that were painted on metal plates and offered to shrines. Rather than pleas for pity, retablos were painted to give thanks to God for the avoidance of death or complete tragedy. They display the light of a sad situation. (Castro-Sethres, 21) Although much of Kahlo’s subject matter was dark, she painted herself with

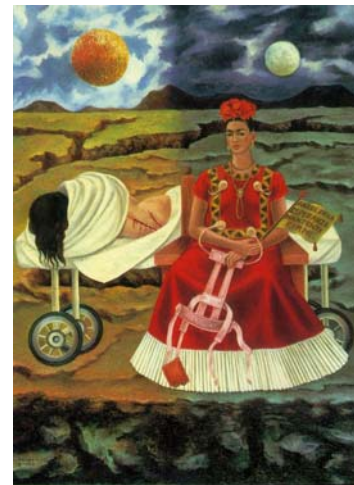
Katherine Long

Portraits

May, 2008

strength, and sometimes as a savior of herself, such as in the painting **Tree of Hope (1946)**, and in **The Two Fridas (1939)**, which she created a double of herself to help her through her trauma.

Along with the Mexicanidad movement that coincided with the Mexican Revolution of 1910 came the revival of Aztec art. Kahlo had much respect for the symbolism they used, and she incorporated many of those symbols in her artwork. Some of her symbols have clear roots and clear meaning, and some are more ambiguous. In most of her self-portraits she is wearing



some sort of pre-Columbian jewelry or dress that represents her pride in her Mexican background. Other examples can be seen in such works as **My Nurse and I (1937)**. The wet nurse in this figure resembles the pre-Columbian sculpture of Coatlicue, the earth goddess and mother of the gods. Coatlicue joins birth and death and represents women who die during childbirth while

simultaneously bringing new life to earth. This displays Frida's affinity to her native land, as she is literally feeding from the past. Kahlo was often accompanied by animals in her self-portraits, some of which having associations with Aztec mythology. In **Me and My Parrots (1941)** she utilizes the parrot, which was considered a sacred supernatural being by the Aztecs. They were associated with sorcery and Kahlo associated herself with sorcery in that she was wonderful at concealing herself. In her life and in her portraits she concealed her self with imagery by creating personas.



Parrots were called a "nahual," one who took many forms. In her art Kahlo took many forms herself. A nahual is said to bring a new reality to light, joining the spirit and body so that they are interchangeable. Her use of animals, especially winged animals can be seen as her nahuals that connect her to the realities of the spiritual world. (Udall, 13).

Katherine Long

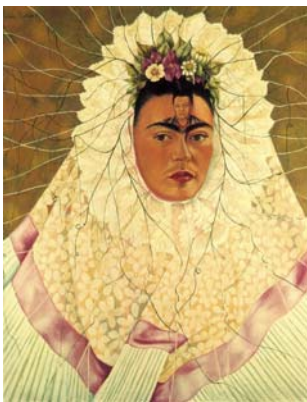
Portraits

May, 2008

Another example would be the hummingbird present in **Self Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird (1940)**, which were associated with courage, foresight and magic.

Kahlo did not have the ability to bear children and her relationship with Rivera was not a conventional monogamous relationship. She did not fit the 'proper' female role of her time, so she found it necessary to explore her identity and discover her own roles. She plays characters in her self portraits, which on first glance can be deceiving of her true character, whatever that may be. But by portraying herself as those characters, she illuminates the fact that she does act in ways that are contradictory to her true feelings. Her tears, blood and violent imagery reveal her true internal turmoil.

Kahlo's use of symbols helped her tell stories and explain emotions. In all of her portraits of herself, she wears a stoic face that gazes directly at the viewer. Her expression has been interpreted as challenging, prideful, and perhaps longing for approval. By doing this she refuses to show emotion without pretext (Monsivais, 10)). She uses symbols to explain herself, but manages to do so without invoking pity. Apart from the political and cultural influences of her imagery, the most painful and heroic events of her life were the influences of her subject matter. Her first miscarriage in 1932, and her relationship with the adulterous Rivera would become some of her common subjects. Diego Rivera was Kahlo's greatest love, but he also caused her pain. His



detachment and affairs with other women left her longing for his attention. He is painted on Kahlo's forehead in both **Diego in My Thoughts (1943)** and **Diego and I (1949)**, which signifies her obsession with him. Her longing to have a family and be a mother would never be fulfilled. In **My Birth (1932)**, she depicts her own birth, after Rivera suggested that she create a painting from every year of her life. This was the first painting she completed after having her miscarriage. It was also completed not long after the death of her mother. The painting may signify not only her birth, but also her rebirth as an artist. Her subject matter was forever changed after the event and her portraits became more innovative. The mother's face is covered, focusing the piece on the infant's head and the mother's genitals. It

Katherine Long

Portraits

May, 2008

confronts the taboo of female genitalia and confronts the conventions of the virginal female form. The portrait of the weeping Virgin Mary that hangs behind the bed also stresses this idea. The child has a unibrow, which shows that the child is Frida, but the ambiguity the mother giving birth allows for multiple interpretations. The mother could be Frida giving new life to her after having gone through tragedy or it could represent her mother in the literal sense. The infant with adult features is still born. This may stem from her miscarriage, or it could represent Frida's sudden thrust into adulthood and near death when she was in a bus accident. She depicts herself again as an infant with adult features in the painting **My Nurse and I (1937)**. Kahlo depicts the adulthood that came along with her pain in a letter to her first love interest:

“I already know everything, without reading or writing. Not very long ago, maybe only a few days back, I was a girl going her way through a world of precise and tangible colors and forms. Everything was mysterious and something was always hidden...If only I had known how hard it is to gain knowledge so suddenly, as though the earth had been elucidated by a single ray of light! Now I live on a planet of pain, transparent like ice. It is as if I'd understood everything all at once, in a matter of seconds.”

Her wisdom was apparent in her examinations of herself. Frida Kahlo created a body of work that told a story of her life. She believed that humans were composed of different entities, and she painted the many different moods and personas that constituted her self. She was masquerading in such a way as to conceal herself while also bringing issues to light. Her portraiture was almost always self-portraiture, and it was a self-examination that was originally honest and candid for its time. Other artists, such as Rembrandt and Van Gogh completed numerous self-portraits that are somewhat telling of their emotional states, but Kahlo is explicitly examining herself and wanting to be examined. She created a collection of work that not only helped to alleviate her pain, but that temporarily captured her existence. Along with confronting herself and the world around her, Herrera would argue, “Kahlo produced some of the most personal and original imagery of the twentieth Century.” (Herrera, 4).

Katherine Long  
Portraits  
May, 2008

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Katherine Long

Portraits

May, 2008

This encyclopedia article gave me a brief overview of events in her life, but it did not stress her art very much.

7. Richmond, robin. *Frida Kahlo in Mexico*. 1994. Pomegranate Art Book.

This book provided biographical information and historical information relating to Mexico. It also contained some analysis of her work and it's relation to her history and politics.

8. Udall, SR. *Frida Kahlo's Mexican Body*. *Woman's Art Journal*, v. 24, no. 2 (Fall 2003/Winter2004) p. insert 1, 10-14.

This text focused mainly on the painting "Time Flies," and the importance of wings and flight in her life and artwork.

9. Winterson, J. *Live Through This*. *Modern Painters*. (June 2005) p. 98-103

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