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Frida Kahlo and the Imagery of Tragedy

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The Mexican artist Frida Kahlo was born in Mexico City on Saturday 6th July 1907 and died in the house in the background of this photograph, aged 47, just one week after her birthday, on Tuesday 13th July 1954. For a long time the details of Frida Kahlo's life and work were generally not well known. They have recently become prominent mainly through the work of the Mexican art historian Hayden Herrera, the emergence of Feminist-based scholarship and the staging of a retrospective exhibition in London in 1982, which was the first major Kahlo exhibition for over thirty years.

Since that time Kahlo's life and modest range of paintings have come under considerable scrutiny as many books, newspaper articles and academic journal papers testify. This recent explosion of contemporary interest has resurrected Kahlo's artistic work from comparative obscurity and neglect to the point where her photogenic image, let alone her work, is almost universally associated with a certain bitter-sweet poignancy.

On Thursday 17th September 1925, just two months after her eighteenth birthday, Kahlo was very seriously injured in Mexico City when a tramcar ran into her school bus. As a result of this accident Kahlo's spinal column was broken in three places in the lumbar region, and her collarbone as well as two ribs were broken. Her right leg had eleven fractures and her right foot was dislocated and crushed. Her left shoulder was disjointed and her pelvis was broken in three places. However, besides cutting short the medical career that she envisioned, the most eventful injury as far as Frida was later concerned, was done by a steel handrail that pierced her body on the left side, skewered the womb and came out through the vagina. She survived the fateful accident, but her horrific injuries later entailed a total of thirty-five surgical operations during the next twenty-eight years - an average of one operation every nine months for the rest of her life! Finally, her health and spirit deteriorated soon after an operation to amputate her right leg and she died at her home Casa Azul (the Blue House), which is now known as the Frida Kahlo Museum at the corner of Allende and Londres Avenues in the suburb of Coyoacán in Mexico City.

(Frida Kahlo: *The Broken Column*, 1944, oil/canvas mounted on masonite, 40 x 30.7 cm., Collection Dolores Olmedo, Mexico City.)

This small, simple and powerful painting, barely the size of an A4 sheet of paper, shows some of Frida Kahlo's subsequent anguish, at the age of thirty-seven, nineteen years after her traumatic accident. In the painting, Kahlo shows herself standing alone in front of a barren and denuded landscape; a landscape emblematic of her inability to bear children, with a distant blue sky that touches a thread of sea, which in her work always indicates her travels and her part European heritage. In the painting, Kahlo's upright and semi-naked body is split in two by an earthquake-like opening, in the centre of which stands the broken column of the title with its jagged breaks suggestive of the injuries suffered by her spine. Her waist is encircled by a sheet, almost like a burial winding sheet as used in many religious martyr paintings and her hands hold the sheet as though she has just briefly opened her inner vulnerability to the gaze of the viewer. The openly displayed body in the painting suggests Kahlo's many surgical operations and the corset she wears holds the body together in an erect and awkward position that seems to give it a veneer of superficial strength. She stands with her arms splayed out manifesting her wounds like a stigmatised saint and the numerous nails driven into her flesh illustrate her pain and highlight her St. Sebastian-like message of physical torment. Her face, though crying, betrays no other hint of external emotion or self pity and the painting offers no hopeful imagery or hint of deliverance in the after-life - no signs of spiritual release are evident and no angels beckon from the sky. Her eyes are almost confrontational in their frontal gaze and, characteristically, they do not look down in dejection nor upward in hope. Her face and its courageous expression are almost truculent in their impassivity. The personal resoluteness shown in this bleakly honest painting may also be seen in real life, as can be observed in family photographs just one year after her horrific accident. She wears masculine clothes to hide her disfigurements, carries a walking cane as if to add a jaunty element to her demeanour and already, at the age of nineteen, seems to display a compensatory and brave attitude towards her many debilitating injuries.

Kahlo's artistic inspiration came not from European intellectuals but from the things around her - Mexican sculptures, ceramics, dolls, figurines, wooden decorations, terracottas, papier-maché items and the colours and forms of her native Mexico. Some of the visual effects of this local charm may be sensed in one of her early works (*Frida Kahlo: Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera*, 1931, 100 x 79 cm., o/c, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Albert M. Bender, No. 36.36061). The work is crudely painted and simple in its composition. Remembering that Kahlo had no formal tuition in painting, it is not surprising that this painting shows a naivety that remains evident even in her later and mature work. In the painting Diego Rivera looms large and holds the artist's palette, even though it was Frida who painted the work - an obvious reference to his superior status as an artist and her subsidiary role and more diminutive status. This is all the more striking when we realize that the whole visual composition of the painting is in the shape of the letter 'D' and that this is based upon the letter 'D', standing for Diego that is engraved on his belt buckle. This modest sentiment is also strengthened by the tender and protective way Frida's hands lie over those of Rivera. The paint handling and technique are unremarkable; the work lacks chiaroscuro and the absence of any perspective gives the work the flat look of a theatrical backdrop. This fair ground-like backdrop effect is visually reinforced by the accompanying painted legend that reads: 'Here you see us, me Frida Kahlo, with my beloved Diego Rivera. I painted these portraits in the beautiful city of San Francisco, California for our friend Mr. Albert Bender, and it was in the month of April in the year 1931'.

Kahlo's particular strength lies in an unavoidably grounded and personal response to her own local environment. Her individual inspiration came, not from foreign sources and aesthetic theory, but from a more independent assimilation of local murals, folk art, votives, folk decoration and the vibrancy of the Latin American world around her. The very sort of items, that is, which crowd her home; these items, metal bas-reliefs, papier-maché figures, handcrafts, pottery and wooden fruit, were obviously collected and arranged with some pride in ways that seem fully aware of their aesthetic qualities. In other words, Kahlo's art, suffused as it is with memento-mori sentiment, was unavoidably born of her particular locality; importantly, it is regionalist rather than internationalist in its origins and sources and is propelled by real rather than imagined impulses that were based upon a life that was experienced in its immediacy rather than recollected in retrospect. Kahlo's paintings, though often substantially and necessarily based upon chronological events and biographical elements, manage to overcome these understandable limitations through fortitude and artistic commitment. Therefore, in essence, Kahlo's paintings may be seen as highly personal repositories of felt content and psychologically inflected aims.

Given her restrictive isolation it's interesting to ask why then are Frida Kahlo's paintings so powerful and memorable? The answer, to my mind, lies in her use of three major underlying structures.

The first of these underlying structures I have called 'personalised dualities'. To illustrate this idea of mine let us look at selected paintings that may clarify and support my view.

(Frida Kahlo: *The Mask*, o/c, 40 x 30.5 cm., 1945, Collection Dolores Olmedo, Mexico City.)

These personalised dualities may be seen to good effect in this work, 'The Mask', of 1945 which illustrates the hidden power of the double persona that seems to lie at the base of many of Kahlo's most powerful paintings. The mask in this work shows an impassive face, behind which Kahlo hides in protective anonymity. Despite this, her tears flow through the mask's eye holes; the mask is pale-skinned and more sophisticated with its bleached hair and its ring clad hand whilst behind it the timid Frida, with her darker hair, remains shyly hidden from our gaze. The disguised reality is concealed, unknown and secretive whilst the exterior surface is that which is superficially displayed and outwardly worn. When one realises this personal strain of realities, the uncomplicated work seems to become a powerful pictorial register of Kahlo's own duality of identities; between what Kahlo feels she is in her inner self and what she would like to be seen as. We all feel this tension between inner feeling and outward appearance. Since this is a private state common to all of us in some way, since we all feel the psychological disharmony between the conscious and the unconscious, the inner and the outer, the mask and the reality, we feel empathically drawn to the delicate tension of the two opposed identities in this deceptively simple and touching painting.

Another painting that displays the visual and psychological power of this structure of 'personalised dualities' is Frida Kahlo's 'My Grandparents, my Parents and I' sometimes called 'My Family Tree' of 1936.

(Frida Kahlo: *My Grandparents, my Parents and I (My Family Tree)*, o/tempera/metal, 30.7 x 34.5 cm., 1936, Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Dr. Roos.)

This small painting shows Frida as a young girl, standing in the courtyard of her house holding a ribbon shaped in the form of fallopian tubes that act as blood lines connecting her to her parents. The double portrait of her parents, taken from their wedding photograph, holds a central position and leads the eye to two cameo depictions of Kahlo's grandparents in the upper section of the painting. On one side we see her maternal grandparents of South American Indian and Spanish stock and on the other we are shown Kahlo's paternal grandparents, of Austrian and Hungarian origin. Also shown is a foetus in the womb and a depiction of a sperm and egg; on one side is the Mexico she knows and on the other is the distant horizon line emblematic of a far-away and unknown Europe.

The underlying structure of 'personalised dualities' in these works stresses the mental interaction between inner thoughts and outward appearances, in ways that underline Kahlo's intensity and visionary courage; they also give her paintings a remarkable compacted power of association that goes some way toward explaining their memorable impact.

These powerful associations lead to the second analytical point in attempting to explain the enigmatic and noteworthy quality of Kahlo's paintings. My second category of Kahlo's work hinges upon her thematic evocation of 'suffering' a theme that, given her many operations, must have had a powerful personal relevance.

(Frida Kahlo: The Little Deer, (or 'The Wounded Deer' or 'I am the Little Deer'.), o/masonite, 1946, 22.4 x 30 cm., SeÒora Ulloa, Mexico City.)

This small painting, 'The Little Deer' or 'I am the Little Deer' of 1946, obviously shows an understandable stress on personal suffering. However, the work is not maudlin in sentiment and carries little self-pity, beyond the tear on Kahlo's impassive face. Kahlo here pictures herself as a timid creature of Nature wounded by Fate or an unknown agent. The branch on the ground is broken as her own youth was broken and she seems to scurry away to safety after being wounded by arrows which probably symbolically refer to a number of traumatic autobiographical incidents. The painting carries additional strange layers of association; one is reminded of the story of St. Eustace, who upon seeing a deer with a cross in its antlers refused to shoot it with an arrow and was converted to Christianity. One may also be reminded of religious images of St. Sebastian whose many arrow wounds and suffering seem strangely echoed in this painting.

The autobiographical and psychological element of this work is given a much more emotional strident note in Kahlo's 'Henry Ford Hospital' of 1932.

(Frida Kahlo: Henry Ford Hospital, o/metal, 30.5 x 38 cm., 1932, SeÒora Olmedo, Mexico City.)

The painting shows Frida, with a tear on her cheek, lying in a hospital bed whilst bleeding internally after a miscarriage. The whole central scene of the bed levitates in a barren and foreign landscape that is at the opposite end of the lush greenery that Frida Kahlo loved at home. Her body is painted in a harshly unromanticised and non-idealised way that gives us a graphic and unflattering glimpse of her totally broken spirit and the hand-wringing anxiety and sense of hopelessness that she must have felt at the time. Six red veins protrude from her awkward body and lead the eye to six attached images: a male foetus (standing for the hoped-for male child), a model of a female torso

(standing for her anatomy), a snail (standing for the slowness of the miscarriage), a sewing machine of the sort used for making sombreros (standing for the piercing pain), an orchid (standing for a uterus suggested by an orchid that Diego brought her in hospital) and a pelvis (standing for the bone fractures she suffered which made childbirth impossible). The overall impression of this lacerating painting is that of a searing candidness about a state of severe loneliness and absolutely crushing psychological abjection.

Another painting that tabulates this theme of personal 'suffering' is Kahlo's 'Self Portrait with Cropped Hair' of 1934.

(Frida Kahlo: Self Portrait with Cropped Hair, o/c, 40 x 27.9 cm., 1940, Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Edgar Kaufmann Jr.)

The work was painted in response to her divorce from Rivera after his affairs with her sister and the actress Dolores Del Rio, who was reputed to be the world's most beautiful woman. In the painting Frida sits wearing Diego's oversized suit, with a pair of scissors placed like the forceps seen in other works. She displays no vestige of her usual femininity, except for her earrings, and the hair she once was so proud of lies around her in almost animated abandon. The legend above repeats the lyrics of a popular Mexican song that runs: 'Look, if I loved you, it was for your hair. Now that you are bald - I don't love you any more'. The power of this image seems to accord with all too common experience; we all know how often women will have their hair done after a traumatic event or disappointing experience; as though to start afresh; as though to engage in some unburdening ritual of mild self mutilation, to lance the boil and start anew with a lighter emotional load. Because we recognise the common reality of this unconscious urge, and because we feel for her plight, we empathise with this repository of Kahlo's personal psychological suffering.

Perhaps the most condensed and powerful image in this category is Kahlo's small painting 'Childbirth' of 1932.

(Frida Kahlo: Childbirth, o/metal, 30.5 x 35 cm., private collection (Madonna Ciccone), New York, 1932.)

The painting shows a raw and uncompromising view of the human drama of childbirth; a drama that is contained within a small room that focuses our attention, almost theatrically, upon the central uncompromising scene. This simple and grave scene is topped by a picture of a weeping Madonna of the sort known in art history as Mater Dolorosa. She views an event that, since the mother in the painting has her head covered, seems to stand for the experience of all women and the work is suffused with the overwhelming feeling that one is born through pain and into pain. That the child, being born in this stark room, has the features of Frida herself only makes this harrowing message all the more personal and pointed.

Despite these understandable indications of personalisation Kahlo's works are not all about the self, notwithstanding what some texts on the artist seem to suggest. A work that may best illustrate this non personal empathy with the more unhappy fate of women is Kahlo's 'A Few Small Snips' of 1935.

(Frida Kahlo: A Few Small Snips, (or 'A Few Small Pricks'), o/metal, 38 x 48.5 cm., Collection Dolores Olmedo, Mexico City, 1935.)

This painting was inspired by a local newspaper report of a brutal murder in Mexico City, where the murderer complained about the so-called 'excessive' term of his sentence. According to the report the man said that all he did was give the woman 'a few small snips' - hardly an apt description for the twenty stab wounds suffered by the victim! The painting and its sardonically ironic title, therefore, seems to have been motivated by a moral disgust with the way women were often treated in Mexico at the time. For Kahlo to do this in a society where women were often voiceless victims, where a wrong look or a gesture can bring trouble and where women's bruises after beatings were referred to as 'love bites', took considerable and unusual courage.

The last category of structural devices in the works of Kahlo that I want to draw attention to is that of the 'emblematic'; a type of iconic cameo format that puts its message across in an almost votive way. For example, when we view Kahlo's 'Self Portrait with Monkey' of 1938 (Frida Kahlo: *Self Portrait with Monkey*, 40.6 x 30.5 cm., 1938, Bequest of A. Conger Goodyear, 1966, Albright-Knox Museum, Buffalo, New York.) , we see an unambiguous full frontal identification with Nature. Nature's attributes here in the form of the monkey, the jungle and the seashell necklace, are arranged around Kahlo's portrait in a way that seems to claim her as their own. The leaf braided into her hair only emphasises this intrinsically felt identification and the cameo-like depiction stresses these allegorical connections with Nature, Her creatures and Her products.

These allegorical connections with Nature often become highly lyrical and revealing of Kahlo's private psychological profile. For example, in Kahlo's 'Self Portrait with Hummingbird' of 1938, (Frida Kahlo: *Self Portrait with Hummingbird*, (or 'Self Portrait with Necklace of Thorns'), 63.5 x 49.5 cm., o/c, 1940, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center Art Collection, Austin, Texas.) we are presented with Kahlo's typically direct gaze, almost martyr like in its stoicism; an association that is strengthened by the presence of blood caused by the thorns which ring around her neck. Around her neck also hangs the hummingbird of the title of the painting. Most texts on Frida Kahlo see the incidence of the hummingbird as an incorporation of South American Indian body decoration habits; as interesting as this is, there is little convincing indication just why she should do this. Another explanation, one that fits our category and the aims found in Kahlo's other paintings, concerns the common habits of small birds such as hummingbirds, finches and wrens. For example, when I go fishing I often notice this interesting habit: small birds always fly into thorny and dense bushes such as grevillea whenever danger threatens - this way they cannot be caught because the bush's spines and density act as a protective shield. Whenever I see this charming and clever habit, I know that there is usually an eagle or hawk in the sky. Additionally, in the past when religious depictions of Christ were forbidden, the tiny goldfinch was often used as symbol of Christ, since it was thought to feed on thorns because of this protective habit. If this view is right then Kahlo here identifies with the hummingbird, because like it she too hides from danger when it threatens. When threatened with danger the hummingbird's haven is a thorny bush and Kahlo's is the greenery of the tropical jungle and its plants. Even today, when trouble looms we retreat to the garden and seek its soothing peace. There is little doubt that Kahlo too felt this and, anyway, is it not true that gardens essentially act as a kind of refuge, a kind of retreat ?

These three pictorial devices, 'personalised dualities', empathy with suffering and the use of emblematic compositions, help us to understand the undoubted power of Kahlo's paintings.

Kahlo's life in retrospect now seems like a vital human fabric torn by fateful tragedy yet tenuously held together with highly perceptive and binding threads of human sensibility and feminine courage. It was a life that, firstly, recorded the courage to keep simply going and tabulate painful experiences in paintings whose small size and lack of egocentrism belie their strength and, secondly, maintained her commitment to her husband Diego Rivera, who despite her pain, their divorce, his many affairs and their re-marriage, must have acted almost like a child substitute for her.

Women who have suffered, identify with Kahlo and her emblematic images serve valuable and recognizable functions. Furthermore, there are those who say that Kahlo's work owes its very existence to the pain that she suffered, as though intense suffering produces intense art. I can't help noticing that this requirement is never expected of non-artists: no-one ever recommends that suffering is good for a physicist, or that misery is good for a mathematician or that a dose of pain would benefit an orchestra conductor. The plain fact is that human suffering is detrimental whenever it appears. I have little patience with this more cruel and shoulder-shrugging explanation of creative merit and can't help wondering what Kahlo's courage may have been produced given different and happier circumstances. Given the undoubted power of Kahlo's work one can hardly avoid speculating upon what such insight may have produced without being mutilated by fate.

Frida Kahlo, then, leaves us with a body of about two-hundred known works, only fifty-five of which are self portraits, which offer a searing blend of Mater Dolorosa iconography, in a naive yet highly personalised, localised and folkloric style. Her demonstrative and feeling work has an aesthetic and redeeming power that tends not only to save it from historical obscurity, but also brands itself into our collective and personal memories in ways that are unique and exemplary. Frida Kahlo's artistic work is autobiographical rather than therapeutic in its content and aims and, though based upon tragedy and misfortune, offers us icons of secular intensity made up of exceedingly rare courage and stoicism.

The paintings cited in this paper may be found illustrated in the following texts: Herrera, Hayden, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, New York, Harper & Row, 1983; Zamora, Martha, *Frida Kahlo: The Brush of Anguish*, San Francisco, Chronicle Books, 1990.

Associate Professor Ken Wach has included a bibliography for those who wish to pursue research on Kahlo's life and work. In publishing articles in *Double Dialogues* we do not usually include references that are not directly cited in the article. However in this instance we make an exception due to the comprehensive nature of the bibliography provided (Eds.)

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