

## *CRUEL BEAUTY*

### **The articulation of 'self', 'identity' and the creation of an innovative feminine vocabulary in the self-portrait paintings of Frida Kahlo**



Figure 1. Fragment of Frida Kahlo's, *The Broken Column* (1944), oil on tin,  
Source: Herrera, Hayden, *Frida : A Biography*, Harper and Row, New York, 1983.

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## *Preface*

Feet what do I need them for  
If I have wings to fly. 1953  
*Frida Kahlo's Diary*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Kahlo, Frida, *The Diary of Frida Kahlo*, Bloomsbury, London, 1995, p134.

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*Abstract*  
*The Self-Portraits of*  
*FRIDA KAHLO*

The objective of this paper is to examine the self-portraits of Frida Kahlo and to explore the way in which they articulate a 'self' and 'identity' through creating an innovative feminine vocabulary. The aim of this creative research is to explore the way in which Frida Kahlo represented her sexual subjectivity in the body of self-portraits she produced in her short life time. The self-portraits, some of which were produced in a state of severe physical disability and chronic illness, were also created in the shadow of her famous partner- socialist Mexican muralist/ revolutionary Diego Rivera. An examination of the significant body of self-portrait paintings produced by Frida Kahlo, informed by her personal letters, poems, and photographs, broadens the conventional definitions of subjective self beyond the generic patterns of autobiographical narrative, characteristic of an inherently masculine Western 'self'. In Kahlo's self-portraits the representation of the urban Mexican proletarian woman-child draws stylistically from the domain of European self-portraiture, early studio photographic portraiture, and the biographical Mexican Catholic retablo art, with its indebtedness to the ancient Aztec Indian symbology of self.

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## *Introduction*

Contemporary feminist theory engaged in questioning the borders drawn around the canons and 'metanarratives' of Western tradition inevitably leads to a critique of these traditions, which express a uniquely masculine rationalist Enlightenment epistemology and *self*. The interpretative model of hermeneutics, as a contextual way of knowing, provides feminism with a model for mediating the interdependent paradigms of feminism and the lived experience of women.<sup>2</sup> A postmodern feminist hermeneutics disrupts the privileged 'masculine' subject of knowledge, by reading and writing strategies that historicize ways of knowing, experience, explanation, and understanding. Hermeneutics, from a feminist perspective, reveals the ways in which representation - language and narrative structure - shapes the self in and through the production of the text.<sup>3</sup> This has considerable implications for postmodern feminism, with regard to the "transformation of women's status and hence her own designations of *identity*."<sup>4</sup>

Crucial to the controversial debates over various perspective's of self offered by women scholars, and the conversation between postmodernism and feminism, respectively, is the question of "the demise of the self as an ontological or empirical principle of identity and constancy"<sup>5</sup>, where the postmodern challenge to the Cartesian object/subject dichotomy has destabilised a unified notion of 'self'. This has particular implications for the sex/gender distinction and indeed the very category 'woman'. In Morny Joy's work in the field, the model of hermeneutics is offered (particularly in relation to narrative theory and the recent work of Paul Riceour), in an effort to delineate what sort of self or selves is appropriate for contemporary women. As the stability of a common identity 'woman', the central subject of feminism, becomes increasingly problematized, the foundations of feminist politics are being radically renegotiated. While indebted to the roots of its modernist feminist struggle, the legacy of the

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<sup>2</sup>Feminist scholarship has not only stood critical in a 'negative' sense of traditional conceptual assumptions, but has made the positive move of putting forth alternative epistemologies which use experience, intuition and evaluation... as modes of knowing...One way into feminist thought for those who distrust us is through the door of hermeneutics or interpretative tradition where one finds the critique of logocentrism in a powerful form... to designate a constellation of methodologies which stand critical of the objectivism and scientism of the white male tradition. ..." in Gloria Bowles, "The Uses of Hermeneutics for Feminist Scholarship", *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol.7 No. 3. p185-188, 1984. [my italics]

<sup>3</sup>Some major texts in the field of hermeneutic feminism that have informed this paper are Morny Joy's "Feminism and the Self", *Theory and Psychogy*, 1993 Sage, Vol. 3 (3), "Feminist Hermeneutics and Religious Studies", *AASR*, August 1987, Melbourne, and Susan J. Hekman's "Modernism, Postmodernism, and Feminism", in *Gender and Knowledge: Elements of a Postmodern Feminism*, Polity Press, 1990

<sup>4</sup>Morny Joy, "Feminism and the Self", *Theory and Psychology*, 1993 Sage, Vol.3 (3), p275.

<sup>5</sup>Morny Joy, "Feminism and the Self", *Theory and Psychology*, 1993 Sage, Vol.3 (3), p291.

"...emancipatory impulse of liberal-humanism and Marxism"<sup>6</sup>, contemporary feminist theory is simultaneously aligned with postmodern hermeneutics in the challenges to foundations of Western thought and the objectivist, scientific model for the social sciences.

Feminist enterprise that opens up contextual ways of knowing, can provide an epistemological method for "...a constant revision of position, vis-a-vis both one's self and one's life situation. It does not aim at truth-values or view representation solely as a form of repetition. It can be defined as a way of knowing that is marked by constant interaction of lived experience with the given parameters of knowledge. This implies that such inquiry involves the reformation of boundaries, those of self-knowledge and of structures of knowing."<sup>7</sup>

This paper shall explore the self-portraits of Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, a revolutionary presence in the history of painting and modernist cultural production, in the context of an engaged critique of the symbolic systems of "patriarchy" in the western tradition. Thus, revealing the gendered dimension of representation, the cultural and the social, and disrupting the privileged 'masculine' subject of knowledge and vision, by interpretative strategies that historicize ways of knowing, experience, explanation and understanding. This feminist enterprise seeks to provide the potential for the creation of new meaning, arising from textual excesses, tensions between texts, opening up new horizons of the real, imaginary and devotional representations<sup>8</sup> in Frida Kahlo's self-portrait works. The body of fifty five self-portraits represent an innovative feminine vocabulary, a inventive female iconography in a visual history defined by masculine sexual subjectivity. The female self faithfully envisioned looks back to returns the gaze in Kahlo's self-portraits where:

...it is the first time in the history of art that a woman has expressed with absolute frankness, unadorned and we could say calmly ferocious, those general and particular events of exclusive concern to a woman... that is why she painted her own birth, her breast-feeding, her growth in the family, and her terrible suffering of all kinds...<sup>9</sup>

Diego Rivera

Frida Kahlo (woman and artist) and the substantial body of painting that she produced has increasingly received the attention of art historians, critics, theorists and feminists, in the contemporary context more so than her husband Diego Rivera, socialist Mexican muralist. Frida Kahlo, Jewish-German Mexican female painter, has been recently iconicised for her significant cultural contribution, moreover, she provides a non-Western female presence in the largely masculine tradition of Western painting. This paper examines the self-portraits of Frida Kahlo from a range of perspectives encompassing (i) The Self-Portrait: From Renaissance to the Photographic Portrait; (ii) The Bus Accident: "Assassinated by Life"; (iii) The Struggle for Identity: Socialism, Myths of Origin, and the Birth of Mexico (La Indigena); (iv) Mexican Folk Retablo (Catholicism) & Ex-Votive Painting; (v) European Surrealism & Latin American Modernism: "Ribbon Around A Bomb"; and resolves with (vi) Conclusion: An Innovative Feminine

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<sup>6</sup>Susan J. Hekman, *Gender and Knowledge: Elements of a Postmodern Feminism*, Polity Press, 1990, p2.

<sup>7</sup>Morny Joy, "Feminism and the Self", *Theory and Psychology*, 1993 Sage, Vol.3 (3), p291.

<sup>8</sup>(lived experience, positions, politics, beliefs, knowledges, sexuality, and spirituality)

<sup>9</sup>Tibol, Raquel, *Frida Kahlo: An Open Life*, (trans. Elinor Randall), p126.



Vocabulary. From these perspectives, the way in which the self-portraits articulate a 'self' and 'identity' is explored, through creating an innovative feminine vocabulary in the medium of painting.

## *1. The Self-Portrait: From Renaissance to the Photographic Portrait*

The moment of self-portraiture becomes the coincidence of the beautiful and the macabre, and of self-love and self-loathing. Freud speculated that melancholia results from a crisis in narcissism: bereft of a love object that has become identified with himself, the narcissistic avenges his loss sadistically upon his own person, through sickness, insomnia, and loss of appetite that afflicts him... "like an open wound."<sup>10</sup>

Joseph Koerner

The genre of portraiture has historically been regarded in the West as a Renaissance invention, charting the emergence of masculine individuality. The assumption that a universal concept of individualism is a cultural precondition for the portrait is discussed by Patricia Simons' unconventional work in the field. "A particular kind of modernist, western, autonomous individualism is assumed, a sense of unique and publicly staged selfhood, so that masculine agency is universalised as the norm... In an over determined patriarchy, audiences were predominantly male and chiefly saw members of their own gender and class populating the spaces and images of the Renaissance city..."<sup>11</sup>

Kahlo's search for self definition and struggle for identity, articulated in her painting, exceeds the traditional generic codes of self-portraiture drawn around the modernist Western canon, as derived from a uniquely masculine post-Enlightenment self. Kahlo's self-portraits disrupt the teleological narrative enshrining the "individual" and the individual's uniqueness precisely because they call attention to *selfhood* as produced through the historically-specific social and cultural context. The self creation process that takes place in the production of the self-portrait reiterates the development of the interdependent and intertwining defining relationships involved in becoming a social subject. "It is precisely this very sense of identification, interdependence and community that are the key elements in the development of women's identity..."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Koerner, Joseph Leo, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art*, The University of Chicago Press, London and Chicago, 1993, p242.

<sup>11</sup>Simons, Patricia, "Homosexuality and erotics in Italian Renaissance portraiture", in Woodall, Joanna (Ed), *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, Manchester University Press, New York, 1997, p29.

<sup>12</sup>Friedman, Susan Stanford, 'Women's Autobiographical Selves : Theory and Practice', in *The Private Self : Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*, Routledge, London, 1988, p36.

The pursuit of knowing and recording oneself can never be a transparent act, it is always political, an articulation of one's culture, mythologies, imaginary, and always an illusory sense of self mastery. Examining the autobiographical impulse of another individual poses the inevitable paradoxical situation - much analysis of the supposed 'subject' could be more properly named self-analysis. The resurrection of a 'past' always involves an identification between writer and subject. The broader feminist project engages with representation, bringing into focus a voice present but often silenced due to the socio-historical and generic preconditions of authorship. The writing of women's lives (amongst others) has not always complied with the Aristotelian trajectory of narrative - where there can be a reply to a demand put forth in the beginning. The project of extending the limits and conditions of the narrative structure reveals the ways in which that structure forms identity in and through representation.

### *The Impulse to Represent the Self*

#### **Narcissus**

The first image was a portrait. In classical mythology, a lovely youth named Narcissus lay beside a pool gazing in adoration of his own reflection...In the Bible St Veronica compassionately pressed a cloth against Christ's face as he stumbled to Calvary, and found His true image miraculously printed on the material...St Luke became a painter because, having experienced a vision of the Virgin Mary, he was inspired to produce a faithful portrait of her.<sup>13</sup>

The self-portraits of Frida Kahlo significantly open up a new horizon in twentieth century painting. The works, created in Mexico in the 1930's and 1940's intersect with and extend the tradition of self-portraiture in the West. Contemporary modernist Mexican concerns to conserve, celebrate, and resurrect indigenous Mexican Indian culture were likened to the classical re-discovery of Greco-Roman antiquity in Renaissance Art.<sup>14</sup> The portrait genre existed in Western antiquity and the early Christian world in the form of statues, busts, coins, sarcophagi and wall-paintings.<sup>15</sup> The re-discovery of portraiture has been considered a definitive feature of the Renaissance, as exemplified by the artist Albrecht Durer's project to represent the self.

Durer fashions his *1500 Self-Portrait* as an emblem of the powers of the individual creator, with the visual allusion to the *vera icon* of Christ. "Durer mythicises the identity between image and maker ...endowing his likeness with the "omnivoyance" of a holy icon, he celebrates himself as a universal subject, whose all-seeing gaze is subject to none."<sup>16</sup> Strikingly, there are parallels with Kahlo's own impulse to represent the self in a period of Mexican history that has been termed the Mexican "Renaissance". The legacy of Durer in Kahlo's art is manifest in the close analogy between (i) bodies and texts, (ii) the artist's self-portrait and the holy image (in the case of Durer, the body of Christ); and (iii) the Renaissance painter's ascent from craftsman to artist, celebrating the artist's art as the *vera*

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<sup>13</sup>Woodall, Joanna (Ed), *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, Manchester University Press, New York, 1997, p1.

<sup>14</sup>(via the translation of Arabic texts into Latin)

<sup>15</sup>Woodall, Joanna (Ed), *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, Manchester University Press, New York, 1997, 1.

<sup>16</sup>Koerner, Joseph Leo, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art*, The University of Chicago Press, London and Chicago, 1993, p242.

icon of personal skill. The Renaissance humanist notion of Man as created in the image of God is envisioned in Durer's idealised *1500 Self-Portrait*, where he is both created in the image of God and through artistic production creates as God. Kahlo's repeated imaging of her incomplete barren body, a suffering and wounded body, places the woman-child at the centre of the universe, as universal all-seeing subject, yet corrupted and incomplete, as in Durer's later self-portraits. Kahlo's self-portrait works such as *The Broken Column* (1944); *The Wounded Deer* (1946); and *The Two Frida's* (1939), recall the representation of the body in pain in Durer's *Self-Portrait as Man of Sorrows* and *Self-Portrait of the Sick Durer* (a. 1512). In these works there is no illusory sense of self mastery in depictions of the wounded and incomplete body.

A shadow flickers across the history of the self-portrait, from Durer's art in the Renaissance to twentieth century modernism - the original founding myth, the desire for self knowledge and the Fall. Transcending the Biblical manifestation of this myth and at the heart of the desire to regain the paradise lost of immortality is ever-present tyranny of the flesh - Death. Durer analogises his body and self in his self-portraits to the divine emblem of Christ, whose ability to transfigure Death in the Resurrection image and his eternal life, is reiterated in Kahlo's self-portrait's which iconocise her suffering body, expressing the interior landscape of the artist, and a psychological space of sensation, emotion, and memory. While these qualities are present in traditional masculine self-portraits, in Kahlo's self-portrait work it is perhaps for the first time that Western painting has represented the specificity of feminine sexual subjectivity.

### **Photographic Portraiture**

Frida Kahlo's Jewish/German immigrant father Guillermo Kahlo was introduced to photography by his second wife (Frida's Spanish/ Indian mother) Matilde Calderon de Kahlo, whose own father was a photographer. Matilde encouraged Guillermo to take up her father's profession. This resulted in Guillermo Kahlo's first major Commission - by the Secretary of the Treasurer under dictator Porfirio Diaz - to record Mexico's architectural heritage for the 1910 celebration of the centennial of Mexican Independence. This won Guillermo the accolade of "first official photographer of Mexico's cultural patrimony".<sup>17</sup> Modern photographic portraiture had a profound influence on Kahlo's self-portraits, which she often used as the basis of her paintings. In the work *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I* (1936) there is visual evidence to suggest that the portraits of her parents are directly based on their wedding photograph<sup>18</sup>. This highlights the legacy of the recent photographic medium upon modern painting, a medium with a tradition spanning centuries. As Roland Barthes writing on photography articulates... "*Painting can feign reality without having seen it. Discourse has signs which have referents... Contrary to these imitations, in Photography I can never deny that a thing has been there.*"<sup>19</sup> The self-portraits represent Kahlo's reality, like the folk retablos in which the village artisan pins objects from the accident to the votive offering (a victims hair, samples of a vehicles wreckage), she symbolically rather than physically incorporates traces of imaginary and material objects. In all the

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<sup>17</sup>Herrera, Hayden, *Frida : A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, Harper and Row, New York, 1983, p5.

<sup>18</sup>Herrera, Hayden, *Frida : A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, Harper and Row, New York, 1983, p8.

<sup>19</sup>Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida*, Flamingo, Great Britain, 1980, p76.[my italics]

roughly fifty five self-portraits produced the lens is turned back upon the viewer who is forced to apprehend the dominating subjective gaze of the model Kahlo, thus the surveyor becomes surveyed.

The personal becomes political in Kahlo's self-portraits where viewer apprehends Kahlo the artist representing an interior self in the public domain of art. As Donald Pease's discusses, of central concern in the notion of authorship is the question of whether or not "... an individual [is] self-determined or determined by material and historical circumstances?...Can the individual ground political authority on individual creativity? Can any artist claim absolute originality ?"<sup>20</sup>

As feminist theories have entered the debates around autobiography, the questions of generic definition and tradition have shifted in order to challenge primarily masculine conventions and canons. Critics have established alternative canons of Western autobiography that include African American slave narratives, diaries, captivity narratives, abolitionist and suffragist personal records, labor activists' accounts, oral histories of immigration and exile, modernist fiction, painting, and other forms of representation.<sup>21</sup>

Concomitant with these concerns is perhaps a re-evaluation of the lives that have been significantly represented, and how these texts have been produced, under what conditions. In examining the self-portraits of Frida Kahlo an understanding of the self creation process at work in authorship might be established. Significantly, why and how has the Author been individualised in Western culture, a polemic Michel Foucault gestures towards in his "What is an Author ?" - "...for instance, when we began our research into authenticity and attribution; the systems of valorisation in which he [the author?] was included; or the moment when stories of heroes gave way to an author's biography; the conditions that fostered the formulations of the critical category of "the man and his work".<sup>22</sup>

To incorporate self-portrait painting under the rubric of 'autobiography', is to speak of portraiture as a transaction, insistent upon the constitutive role of an inter subjective relation of self and other in generating the portrait image.<sup>23</sup> As Thomas Lomas identifies in his paper, "*Inscribing alterity: transactions of self and other in Miro self-portraits*", the portrait is a transaction between painter (artist) and subject (sitter), however, this relationship is a dialectic of self and other in the case of the self-portrait. "To claim, as psychoanalysis does, that otherness is from the outset inscribed within self is to assert that the subject is divided - is not, in other words, *in-dividual*. The subject is neither

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<sup>20</sup>Pease, Donald E, "Author", in F. Lentricchia and T. McLaughlin (eds), *Critical terms for Literary Study*, The University of Chicago Press, 1995, p105.

<sup>21</sup>Kaplan, Caren, "Resisting Autobiography : Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects", in Smith, S & Watson, J (eds) *De/Colonizing the Subject : The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1992.

<sup>22</sup>Foucault, Michel, "What is and Author ?", in P. Rabinow (ed.) *The Foucault Reader*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1984. [my brackets]

<sup>23</sup>Lomas, Thomas, "*Inscribing alterity: transactions of self and other in Miro self-portraits*", in Koerner, Joseph Leo, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art*, The University of Chicago Press, London and Chicago, 1993, p167.

identical with itself nor with the portrait that each of us paints of ourselves, that consoling fiction of an autonomous ego invested with attributes of 'permanence, identity and substantiality'."24

Kahlo's self portraits, produced outside the West, achieve a project similar to that of the European Surrealists - to interrogate and subvert a "permanence, identity and substantiality" by awakening, unleashing and representing the repressed desires of that *dark continent*, the unconscious. Automatic writing, an art practised by the Surrealists as fracturing an illusory unity of self, was performed habitually by Kahlo, as evidenced in her published Diary of Frida Kahlo. On the pages of her diary one finds traces of spontaneous poetic outbursts and watercolour paintings and sketches that have not been designed but candidly display a 'self' that is unrehearsed. "A voice emanating from an 'other scene'...the automatic message gave proof of an irreducible heterogeneity within the self - a view endorsed by the Surrealists' avid reading of psychoanalysis; 'a method I esteem and which I believe seeks nothing less than to *expel man from himself*' was how Andre Breton appraised it."25

Lomas discusses Spanish Surrealist painter Joan Miro's need to inspect and record his features, with his *Self-Portrait I*, at a time of undoubted personal distress and uncertainty. That is, the need to *expel man from himself* might be interpreted as *to create an innovate vocabulary of self*, not an individual masculine subjective self, but rather in the case of Frida Kahlo, to articulate an innovative feminine vocabulary through self-portraiture. As Lomas recalls, Goethe instructs the artist to "Make the experiment, and look at yourself, in a concave mirror, and you will be terrified at the inanimate, unmeaning monstrosity, which like Medusa, meet your eye. Something similar is experienced by the artist..."26 Kahlo's self-portraits consistently rupture and depict the body as an aberration, half woman half deer in *The Wounded Deer* (1946) and half woman half antique Grecian column in *The Broken Column* (1944). Kahlo's need was to inspect and record metaphors of self, in the quest to create identity, this was accomplished through the invention of *selves* in various incarnations and guises. However, the cohesiveness of the self-image breaks down in the self-portraits where Kahlo's body is often represented as wounded, bleeding, broken, and suffering. The articulation of Kahlo's various *selves* might be interpreted in the context of the postmodern debates on *self*, which is argued as a *site of subjectivity* or as a *subject whose identity is imposed by social conditions*. In the words of postmodern feminist Morny Joy:

In the place of a self as a concept of autonomy, the postmodern subject is viewed as a concept of autonomy, the postmodern subject is viewed as the locus of extraneous forces, primarily of a linguistic or discursive variety. These forces are understood as exerting control in such a way that traditional proclamations of self-determination are now perceived as the fabrications that were. At the same time, authorial control of any text is undermined. The hegemony of conceptual reason is dismantled and put into question.<sup>27</sup>

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24Lomas op cit p167.

25Lomas op cit p168.[my italics]

26Johann Goethe, *Goethe on Art*, trans. John Gage, Scolar Press, London, 1980, p185, cited in Lomas op cit p169.

27Morny Joy, "Feminism and the Self", *Theory and Psychology*, 1993 Sage, Vol.3 (3), p279.

In this way, Kahlo's self-portraits, and the various images of self articulated, can be read in view of acknowledged unresolved tensions, where the self is a constantly negotiated project, allowing depictions of self that avoids the extremes of either absolute authority or a fleeting enigma. Kahlo's self-portrait project might be interpreted as an aesthetic articulation of what French feminist philosophers Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva have theorised., affirming a self-defined feminine sexuality and liberation from patriarchy by proclaiming sexual difference, and creating a notion of Kahlo, and indeed women's sexual autonomy and specificity, defining a new discourse in painting that innovates fragmentary, poetic, fluid and ambiguous styles in representation.<sup>28</sup> Irigaray's project, both restorative and deconstructive, has as its central strategy the morphological metaphor of the text. Morphology is a term used to refer to the way in which the body and anatomy of each sex is lived by the subject and represented in culture. "A psycho-social and signficatory concept, it replaces the biologism and essentialism of notions of 'anatomical destiny' pervasive in psychoanalysis."<sup>29</sup> It is necessary to situate Irigaray's discussion of the female body and feminine pleasure as a tactical response to the misogynist texts in the history of patriarchal representations, particularly with regard to philosophy and psychoanalytic theory. The strategy is one of seeking blind spots, points of textual excess that all texts rely on yet disavow.<sup>30</sup> The psychic configuration of the body becomes analogous to the text were the need to make present the disavowed textual excesses can be likened to the excessiveness of female sexuality (jouissance). Kahlo's self-portrait create meaning discursively, where the painting becomes analogous to the self and its psychic configuration.

Irigaray's most powerful metaphor for female sexuality, the emblem of the two lips, a *morphological* rather than biological metaphor is a one of a set of tactics devised which "...continually questions phallogentrism, destroying its apparent *naturalistic* self-evidence and demonstrating possible alternatives..."<sup>31</sup> This attack on Western rationality suggests that women's oppression is rooted in language and representation. Kahlo's paintings of self, by innovating a unique symbology, destabilise the power of a rationalist masculine subject of painting, and produce on the canvas what Irigaray wrote of as *écriture feminine*<sup>32</sup>- plural, fluid, diffuse, ambiguous women's representation - speaking of the feminine "body" as socially constructed.

Kahlo's self-portrait representations share with other marginalised voices of post colonial societies, Black, Chicano, Asian and emigre women in the West the endeavour to define and affirm the feminine self. However, in the context of postmodern debates should the endeavour to define and affirm 'woman' be charged with essentialism ? Should the

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<sup>28</sup>Where Kristeva deconstructs the notion of sexual identity, Irigaray's work affirms self-defined femininity and liberation from patriarchy by proclaiming womanspeak (le parler-femme), particularly in her texts *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985) and *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Cited in Elizabeth Grosz's *Sexual Subversions*, Allen & Unwin, 1989, p100-101.

<sup>29</sup>Grosz op cit ppxix.

<sup>30</sup>Grosz op cit p110.

<sup>31</sup>Moi, Toril, "The Missing Mother: The Oedipal Rivalries of Rene Girard", *Diacritics*, Summer, 1982, cited in Grosz op cit p113.

<sup>32</sup>Grosz op cit p113.

question of whether there can be a 'feminine nature' and the possibility of generating a theory of feminine specificity that is not essentialist obscure the shared feminist struggle to articulate *selfhood* ? May that entail delineating (i) a position from which to stand (perspective, location within a field of possibilities, a site in the socio-cultural terrain); (ii) a voice by which to be heard; (iii) language by which one is understood (new meanings created in language and representation, *écriture féminine*); (iv) political visibility (sexual politics); or (v) spiritual liberation (women's spiritual concepts).

The destabilisation and renegotiation of those boundaries that demarcate political agency has expanded the qualifications for being a subject that seeks visibility and legitimacy. Judith Butler argues, "If a stable notion of gender no longer proves to be the foundational premise of feminist politics, perhaps a new sort of feminist politics is now desirable to contest the reification of gender and identity..."<sup>33</sup> Butler suggests that what regulates and maintains gender relations is the construction of the category 'woman'. The stability and coherence of the category 'woman' can only be achieved in the context of the hegemonic matrix of heterosexual desire. The focus of Butler's attack on Western tradition is her challenge to heterosexism, she argues, constituting the belief system upon which the human sciences are founded. Luce Irigaray would argue that in the face of *phallogentrism* we live in a resolutely homosexual culture, "a culture based on the primacy of the male homme, who can function only with others modelled on himself... Women can be represented only by means of a violence that contains them, and their differences, within masculine sameness..."<sup>34</sup> This view has resonance, given the Greek origins of Western thought, particularly in relation to the *Philosopher Queens* of Plato's Republic (perhaps this could be Plato's subtle form of humour?). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (indebted to Foucault) points to development of a discourse (by the nineteenth century) that not only forms personal life but is central to the disciplining of knowledge, that is the assignment of homo/ hetero-sexual to the individual, just as male or female is assigned.<sup>35</sup> Sedgwick points to the current crisis of homo/hetero-sexual binary in discourse that radically rethinks identity and embraces the notion of gender ambiguity.

Gender ambiguity refutes the limitations of there being only two categories and the immutable character of those gender assignments. Butler suggests that in contemporary thought there is a movement beyond the sex/gender opposition at the heart of feminism, where treatment of gender as a social construction of sexuality fails to elaborate the fantasmatic construction of sexual identity. Judith Butler asks, does then "the exclusionary practices that ground feminist theory in a notion of "women" as subject paradoxically undercut feminist goals to extend its claim to "representation"?"<sup>36</sup> The way in which Frida Kahlo foregrounds her subjective self, through the production of a body of self-portrait works and through the adoption of dramatised ritual dress and adornment, in the donning of

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<sup>33</sup>Butler, Judith, *Subjects of Sex/Gender*, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, Great Britain, 1990, p5.

<sup>34</sup>Grosz op cit p107.

<sup>35</sup>Clough, Patricia Ticineto, "Queer Embodiments of Feminist Theorizing", *Feminist Thought: Desire, Power and Academic Discourse*, Blackwell, 1994, p144.

<sup>36</sup>Butler op cit p5.

traditional Mexican apparel - the *rebozo* - heightened for those apprehending the work of art (or Kahlo in the artist in the flesh) a sense of what constitutes the codes of the feminine. Kahlo's self-conscious and elaborate self-styling can be likened to the practises of the transsexual, whose theatricalisation of gender simulates feminine gesture, and where "...the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame...congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being."<sup>37</sup>

Inextricably identified with the Kahlo's artistic persona were the plaster corsets she was forced to endure, after multiple operations to her spine, in an attempt to correct an old injury. Kahlo drew attention to the objects, which caused her great discomfort and symbolised her agony, by decorating the corsets with flamboyant painted imagery significant to her life at that moment. An image of one of Kahlo's corsets, decorated by paintings of an unborn foetus, a red hammer, sickle and stars, reveals to historians some of the artist's particular concerns, ones that she chose to adorn the apparatus of her physical oppression, the result of injury and illness. "The corset, a contraption designed and marketed to "glamorize", "beautify", "regenerate - the modern degenerating body", and "purify- and maintain the healthy body"<sup>38</sup> is adorned and displayed in order to invoke a kind of mass exhibitionism/ voyeurism.

Kahlo's embellished corset mirrors her impulse towards self-portraiture, both the coincidence of the beautiful and the macabre, of self-love and self-loathing, where in Freudian terms Kahlo the narcissist avenges the loss of a love-object (in her case loss of physical self-mastery through injury and disability) upon oneself "through sickness, insomnia, and loss of appetite that afflicts him..."like an open wound".<sup>39</sup> Indeed, the subject and titles of many of Kahlo's self-portrait paintings evoke notions of the "wound", a motif running through her works and one that comes to represent woman as 'castrated other'; Kahlo's physically injured self; and the emotional and psychic inscription of pain.

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<sup>37</sup>Butler *ibid*

<sup>38</sup>Best, Sue, *Foundations of Femininity: Berlei Corsets and the (Un)making of the Modern Body*, Honours Dissertation, Fine Arts Department, University of Sydney, 1988, p6.

<sup>39</sup>Koerner, Joseph Leo, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art*, The University of Chicago Press, London and Chicago, 1993, p242.



## 2. *The Bus Accident* *“Assassinated by Life”*

Feet what do I need them for  
If I have wings to fly. 1953

*Frida Kahlo's Diary*<sup>40</sup>

Central to the Frida Kahlo narrative of self is a tragic bus accident, the injuries incurred of which she never physically or emotionally recovered. Indeed the physical injuries sustained in the accident when she was eighteen years old prevented her ability to hold a pregnancy, and in later years, of being able to walk. Kahlo remembered the bus accident on the afternoon of 17 September, 1925:

The accident took place on a corner in front of the San Juan market exactly in front. The streetcar went slowly, but our bus driver was a very nervous young man. When the trolley car went around the corner the bus was pushed against the wall...It is a lie that one is aware of the crash, a lie that one cries. In me there were no tears. The crash bounced us forward and a handrail pierced me the way a sword pierces a bull...<sup>41</sup>

Frida's lover Alejandro Gomez Arias described her situation:

...Something strange had happened. Frida was totally nude. The collision had unfastened her clothes. Someone on the bus, probably a painter had been carrying a packet of powdered gold. This package broke, and the gold fell all over the bleeding body of Frida...and then I noticed with horror that Frida had a piece of iron in her body." ...They thought she would die on the operating table... The steel handrail had literally skewered her body at the level of the abdomen; entering her left side, it had come out through her vagina. "I lost my virginity", she said.<sup>42</sup>

The images of suffering, wounds, loss, grief, and barrenness appearing in much of her work could be derived from this fateful accident, an event scarring her body for life. The tears that she claims she never shed on that day seem to be endlessly reproduced in her pictures. The pain that she suffered throughout her short lifespan necessitated the long term and perpetual use of pain-killers and morphine. Indeed, all medical evidence pointed towards this substance as the cause of Kahlo's suicide 13 July 1954.

Mortality was a shadow that came to haunt Kahlo from a very young age in both physical and psychic terms. In describing herself as young woman she claims she was "**assassinated by life**". Her ability to articulate the physical pain that she had to endure and the psychic consequence of that pain predominated in her writing and painting, but it did not dominate. The indescribably sad and beautiful ability of her words and images to transcend that pain is what has made her work enduring.

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<sup>40</sup>Kahlo, Frida, *The Diary of Frida Kahlo*, Bloomsbury, London, 1995, p134.

<sup>41</sup>Herrera, Hayden, *Frida : A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, Harper and Row, New York, 1983, p48.

<sup>42</sup>Herrera, Hayden, *Frida : A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, Harper and Row, New York, 1983, p49.

Her physical pain and its psychic inscription found form in the production of her art. She traces the contours of this pain in (i) sketches of the unfortunate bus accident, (ii) the physical and psychological repercussions of the accident - paintings of her miscarriages (the diseased body), (iii) self-portraits depicting Kahlo's (metaphorically) wounded body (heartache) - *Remembrance of an Open Wound* (1938), *Memory* (1937), *The Broken Column* (1944), *The Two Fridas* (1939), *Frida and the Abortion* (1932) and (iv) letters bordering on the obsessive to her physicians. She is wearing non-Mexican clothes (perhaps this is inspired by photographs taken of her by American friend Lucienne Bloch in New York (1935)).<sup>43</sup> Connected by red ribbons (life veins) to Kahlo are two dresses, one on the right an empty Tehuana costume, the other on the left an empty school girls uniform. Her hands are cut off, suggesting powerlessness, her right foot injured and bandaged in a boat, stepping on her own *ocean of tears* (suffering), her left leg in a dainty shoe on solid earth. Herrera suggests the various costumes indicate Kahlo's multiple identities (*selves*), the school girl uniform her innocent girlhood weighed down by Rivera's Tehuana Kahlo (Rivera encouraged Kahlo to wear traditional Mexican dress).

Perhaps the boat foot is a symbol of separation from Diego...*Memory* is an excruciatingly accurate rendering of pain in love, as simple and straightforward as a valentine heart shot through by an arrow. One is convinced that Frida knew all too well that the trite expression "broken heart" has a basis in real, physical sensation - an ache or a sense of a fracture in the chest - a feeling that a sword turns and twists in an ever-expanding wound. In Frida's painting her heart has been yanked out of her chest, leaving a gaping hole pierced by a shaft which recalls the handrail that impaled her body during her accident.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Herrera op cit p188.

<sup>44</sup>Herrera op cit p189.

Kahlo's *Memory* (1937) and *Remembrance of an Open Wound* (1938) recall the emotional pain she suffered coming to terms with her husband Diego Rivera's affair with her sister Christina. In these paintings Kahlo uses physical wounds as symbols for psychic injury.

In the self-portrait *Memory* (1937), a cropped haired Kahlo is pierced like bull through her heart, two little cupids see-sawing playfully on the handle of the sword, causing her greater agony. She is wearing non-Mexican clothes (perhaps this is inspired by photographs taken of her by American friend Lucienne Bloch in New York (1935)).<sup>45</sup> Connected by red ribbons (life veins) to Kahlo are two dresses, one on the right an empty Tehuana costume, the other on the left an empty school girls uniform. Her hands are cut off, suggesting powerlessness, her right foot injured and bandaged in a boat, stepping on her own *ocean of tears* (suffering), her left leg in a dainty shoe on solid earth. Herrera suggests the various costumes indicate Kahlo's multiple identities (*selves*), the school girl uniform her innocent girlhood weighed down by Rivera's Tehuana Kahlo (Rivera encouraged Kahlo to wear traditional Mexican dress). "Perhaps the boat foot is a symbol of separation from Diego...*Memory* is an excruciatingly accurate rendering of pain in love, as simple and straightforward as a valentine heart shot through by an arrow. One is convinced that Frida knew all too well that the trite expression "broken heart" has a basis in real, physical sensation - an ache or a sense of a fracture in the chest - a feeling that a sword turns and twists in an ever-expanding wound. In Frida's painting her heart has been yanked out of her chest, leaving a gaping hole pierced by a shaft which recalls the handrail that impaled her body during her accident."<sup>46</sup> The over sized heart that has been yanked out of her chest rests at her feet, emphasising the enormity of her turmoil, its severed valves pumping rivers of blood up into the horizon of mountains and down into the ocean. "The image has something of the brutality of an Aztec sacrifice in which the victim's beating heart was torn from him, and blood ran in rivulets down stone temple steps to the ground, where his arms and legs were sold as meat."<sup>47</sup>

Herrera suggests that in the context of modern and colonial Mexican culture the symbol of the *Sacred Heart*, often girdled with a crown of thorns, in its various Catholic popular representations was a proliferate image. Indeed, the way in which Kahlo metaphorised the heart visually in her painting would have had particular historical gravity to the Mexican viewers, in regard to the sacrificial Aztec culture and its blending with the Spanish Catholic imagery. Significantly, the use of the Sacred Heart metaphor in Kahlo's self-portraits add another layer to this iconography, Kahlo's literal, physical and psychic suffering - the effect of her early bus accident and the ongoing injuries she sustained and the emotional turmoil she experienced in her husband Diego Rivera's infidelities.

*Remembrance of an Open Wound* (1938) recalls the suffering expressed in *Memory* (1937) another "bloody" self-portrait. In this work the wounds of Kahlo's suffering remain open and unhealed. An lifted Tehuanan skirt reveals her two open wounds, one a gash on her thigh near her genitals, another on her bandaged foot. It is as if through the

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<sup>45</sup>Herrera op cit p188.

<sup>46</sup>Herrera op cit p189.

<sup>47</sup>Herrera op cit p189.

body of self-portraits she has created a dream scape and visual language through which to represent an autobiographical vocabulary. The wound upon her thigh near her genitals recalls her recent cuckolding, the wound on her foot references the sustained injuries of the bus accident. "This "open" wound - an invented one- drips blood onto the white petticoat. Next to the gash lies a leafy plant, possibly a reference to the link Frida saw between her own blood and wounds and the idea of fertility, a connection first set forth in Frida and the Abortion. The thigh wound is intended as an allusion to her genitals conceived as a sexual wound or as the real wound in her vagina caused by the metal rod that pierced her pelvic region during the accident...[the painting] shows that Frida transformed the "open wound" of jealousy and betrayal into a different kind of openness."<sup>48</sup>

Kahlo sought the unattainable wholeness and the illusion of self mastery of her wounded and incomplete body through the aesthetic experience, and through the production of her self-portrait paintings. The self-reflexive activity of self-portraiture can be likened to the cinematic experience. Christian Metz' seminal work in the field of cinema studies asserts that the cinema "has a number of roots in the unconscious and in the great movements illuminated by psychoanalysis, but they can be all traced back to the institutionalised signifier."<sup>49</sup> Metz traces some of these roots back to (i) mirror identification, (ii) voyeurism and (iii) exhibitionism. The cinema is an imaginary signifier, constituted of a certain presence and a certain absence, in that the cinema is not a phantasy, it presents us with representations of absent objects, in the mirror-screen.

The fullness, the completeness that the child experiences through the maternal supplementation of its needs is interrupted by lack...It will attempt to fill its (impossible, unfillable) lack. Its recognition of lack signals an ontological rift with nature or the Real. This gap will propel it into seeking an identificatory image of its own stability and permanence (the imaginary), and eventually language (the symbolic) by which it hopes to fill the lack. <sup>50</sup>

The search for this completeness, or desired wholeness, is a nostalgia for the wholeness experienced with the infants symbiotic relationship with the mother, that must be given up in order to exist as self, as "I". The paradox is thus, to a self one must give up these maternal relations; in doing so one is faced with the infinite task of filling the un-filled void.

Desire for an imaginary wholeness and unity, is the quest to merge with the One, the (m)other, the universe. The human subject's quest for incorporation is articulated intra-psychically, inter-personally, aesthetically, through the religious, political, social and cultural experience. In apprehending the work of art the viewer is absorbed by the art object. The production of art itself is a process of artist merging with artwork. The experience of wholeness can be

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<sup>48</sup>Herrera op cit p191.

<sup>49</sup>Metz, Christian, "Disavowal, Fetishism", in the *Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, translated by Michael Taylor, New York, Oxford University Press, 1974, p69.

<sup>50</sup>Grosz, Elizabeth, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*, Allen & Unwin, Australia, 1994, p34.

attained through the political experience; divine worship; religious ecstasy; erotic experience; and aesthetic experience etc. allowing the individual to feel a sense of identification and oneness.

This tragedy is embodied in Jacques Lacan's account of the Freudian Mirror Phase, that developmental stage where the child literally becomes an embodied subject, revolving around its identification with an image it recognises as "self", the reflection in the mirror. This is also an identification in the metaphoric sense, where the child becomes aware that its (m)other is separate, the self exists in relation to another, self - as -other. The tragic realisation of self as "I", distinct from an outside world, is based on this primary understanding that one is not complete; the tragic realisation is one of absence, loss, lack of the mother or gratification of needs. "...in the absence of the breast or whatever is needed, 'need changes to demand (articulation), and if unsatisfied or unreciprocated, to desire."<sup>51</sup> This absence is substituted for self-reliance. The Gestalt experience, recognition of self in mirror (promised self mastery), is simultaneously a misrecognition, the image of self as unified totality can not be reconciled with the biological sensory and motor incapacities of the child.

Kahlo's self-portraits are representations in a kind of mirror-screen, where the subject metaphorically revisits entrance into the symbolic; and formation of the ego by identification with representations projected onto the canvas. But it is not only the identification with representations of objects and others that is significant, it is more recognition of self as the perceiver (all-powerful, all-seeing).

Kahlo's self-portraits restage the mirror phase, where the child can distinguish itself from the world by *substituting images or representations for lived experiences*. Incapacitated through much of her life, often bedridden for long periods of time and immobile physically, Kahlo turned inward for much of her inspiration and represented on canvas an imaginary interior world. In many of the self-portraits Kahlo returns the gaze of the viewer/camera, and in identifying with the monocular perspective of the camera, determines the vanishing point, doubling the human perception of consciousness. It is within the domain of the look that the mirror phase is played out, the domain of domination and mastery. Within this field the child distinguishes between itself and its environment, and perceives itself as subject in a world of objects. Lacan's account of the gaze in the viewing of the work of art figures the art object as that which possesses the gaze. In viewing the work of art one must invariably lay down our own look, lay down our weapons, so to speak, and be looked at by the artwork.<sup>52</sup>

In vain your image comes to meet me  
And does not enter me where I am who only shows it  
Turning towards me you can find  
On the wall of my gaze only your dreamt-of-shadow.  
I am that wretch comparable with mirrors  
That reflect but cannot see

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<sup>51</sup>Gallop, Jane, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: The Daughter's Seduction*, Methuen, 1980, p6.

<sup>52</sup>Lacan, Jacques, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Penguin Books, United Kingdom, 1979, p101.

Like them my eye is empty and like them inhabited  
By your absence which makes them blind<sup>53</sup>

*Jacques Lacan*

In contradistinction with Sigmund Freud's account of the realist ego, Lacan relies on Freud's narcissistic interpretation of the ego, which is developed in *The Three Essays on Sexuality* (1905). The genesis of the narcissistic ego is linked to primary narcissism where the ego is its own libidinal object, simultaneously subject and object. The narcissistic ego is "an entirely fluid, mobile and amorphous series of identifications, internalizations of images/perceptions...a kind of psychic repository or dam where libido can be stored from its various sources in the body in anticipation of finding appropriate objects in which it could be invested."<sup>54</sup> The mirror stage is an account of the genesis of Freud's narcissistic ego. This coincides with the auto-erotic pleasure, a part of the infant's body, standing in for maternal supplication. The mirror stage sets up relations between the interiority the child recognises and an exterior world (reality), generating subjectivity. However the subject, in order to be a subject, must necessarily internalise otherness (Lacan refers to the work of Roger Caillois in relation to insect mimicry and assimilation with environment<sup>55</sup>). For human beings survival is not contingent upon instincts, but rather upon social and cultural organisation which is regulated by language. The child in its pre-oedipal relationship with the mother is in a state of symbiosis with its environment. Identity is founded on the infant's development of corporeal boundaries. Thus the formation of a corporeally enacted femininity is not a product of choice, but rather the citation of the norm, one whose complex history is indissociable from the relations of discipline, regulation and punishment.<sup>56</sup>

Contemporary psychoanalytic feminists refigure Lacan's reading of Freud in terms of rethinking sexual difference. The tragedy of the mirror stage for the little girl is that she shall never have a totalised self image. She will never be perceived as a cohesive whole because she does not possess the phallus. For the little girl the psychological unity is in conflict with more than the lived unco-ordinated aggregate of parts but also later the anatomical distinction between her own femaleness (castration - lack - not one) and the masculine (possession of penis - wholeness - one). The ultimate tragedy of the mirror stage is that the subject only ever attains unity with the infinite in Death, when this mortal coil returns to the ground, to the elements. In returning to the soil, back into the elements, the human subject-body then, and only then, is literally re-incorporated back into the (m)other.

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<sup>53</sup>"The function of the picture-in relation to the person to whom the painter, literally offers his picture to be seen - has a relation with the gaze...The painter gives something to the person who must stand in front of his painting...He gives something for the eye to feed on, but he invites the person to whom this picture is presented to lay down his gaze there as one lays down one's weapons...something is given so much as the gaze meets the eye, something that involves abandonment, the laying down of the gaze." Lacan, Jacques, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Penguin Books, United Kingdom, 1979, p17.

<sup>54</sup>Freud, Sigmund, "The Ego and the Id", in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Hogarth Press, London, 1923, p25.

<sup>55</sup>Grosz, Elizabeth, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*, Allen and Unwin, Australia, 1990, p33.

<sup>56</sup>Butler, Judith, *Bodies that Matter*, New York, Routledge, 1993, 0232.

The quest for unattainable wholeness, manifested in the desire to return to the source, the infinite, is a dominant theme in Frida Kahlo's painting. It is as if Kahlo suffered a double castration, both psychic and physical, being female and experiencing the piercing of her torso at such an early age. In the production of the work of art Kahlo was able to momentarily experience her own metaphoric Death and thus attain the desired yet tragic unity longed for. *Death and the wound* are the most significant motifs running through her paintings. Some works that evoke these twin motifs: *The Wounded Deer* (1946), *The Two Fridas* (1939), *The Dream* (1940), *Thinking of Death* (1943), *The Suicide of Dorothy Hale* (1938-39), *The Broken Column* (1944), and *Tree of Hope Stand Fast* (1946) [IMAGES]. The visual re-creation and re-interpretation of her body in these works are an act of transgression of physical and psychic pain. The focus on the autobiographical representation of Kahlo's body in pain does not depoliticise the work by over-personalising it, pathologising it, nor reducing it to therapy. Rather, Kahlo's use of intimate representations of her body politically locates her artistic practice and create highly politicised public statements.<sup>57</sup> Kate Chedgzoy in "Frida Kahlo's 'grotesque' bodies", draws upon Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection<sup>58</sup> and the Bakhtian concept of carnival<sup>59</sup>, locating her reading of Kahlo's work as a white western feminist working within the context of recent attempts to theorise the female body, which is in some way *disfigured*, *hystericalised*, or engendered *grotesque*.<sup>60</sup> Her related project is to construct a critical language with which to speak of emotion and physical pain. "Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned."<sup>61</sup> Chedgzoy argues mobilising a psychoanalytic concept such as abjection runs the risk of locking a reading of Kahlo's self-portraits into an association with the unconscious and the exotic, it does account for the recent preoccupation of Western feminists and the European female with her paintings. Chedgzoy is careful to question the fascination of Western feminists with the self-portraits, and asks if it is merely narcissistic fascination and exploitative pleasure in the exotic that motivates contemplation of these works? In many ways, the careful positioning of Chedgzoy's discourse on Kahlo's paintings questions the capitalist/ Western/ European fascination with the self-portraits, can this be explained as a macabre attraction to a bizarre side-show of grotesque deformity? Drawing on Jean Franco's work on gender and representation in Mexico, the polemic is discussed as a challenge to the conventions of European art in that the 'mutilated body trespasses on the place of the female nude'.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>Chedgzoy, Kate, "Frida Kahlo's 'grotesque' bodies", in (Eds) Florence, Penny and Reynolds, Dee, *Feminist Subjects, multi-media: Cultural Methodologies*, Manchester University Press, New York, 1995, p39.

<sup>58</sup>Kristeva, Julia, *Power of Horrors; An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York, 1982.

<sup>59</sup>Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhailovitch, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky, M.I.T Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1968.

<sup>60</sup>Chedgzoy, Kate, "Frida Kahlo's 'grotesque' bodies", in (Eds) Florence, Penny and Reynolds, Dee, *Feminist Subjects, multi-media: Cultural Methodologies*, Manchester University Press, New York, 1995, p40.

<sup>61</sup>Scarry, Elaine, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the Modern World*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1987, p4.

<sup>62</sup>Franco, Jean, *Plotting Women:: Gender and Representation in Mexico*, Verso, London, 1989, pxxiii.[my bold]

The unclothed body is not a 'self' but a socialised body, a body that is opened up by instruments, technologised, wounded, its organs displayed to the outside world. The 'inner' Frida is controlled by modern society far more than the clothed Frida, who often marks her deviation from the norm by defiantly returning the gaze to the viewer. The naked Frida does not give the viewer what they want - the titillation of female nakedness - but a revelation of what the examining eye does to the female body.<sup>63</sup>

From the origins of Western the tradition, the female body has been used as a metaphor for nature, passion, the impulses, as distinct from reason and civilisation. However, the feminine body in Kahlo's self-portraits, can not merely be collapsed into the universal body, the maternal body, an allegorical body likened to the Madonna. Rather, representation of her mutilated 'grotesque' body is associated with that which is always "alien, marginal, repressed, other; with those artistic practices and social instances which disrupt the symbolic by means of fragmentary, provisional, carnivalesque eruptions, thereby revealing the points of stress and instability in the symbolic realm and undermining its claim to mastery."<sup>64</sup> In Kahlo's paintings such as *What the Water Gave Me* (1938) [IMAGE], *The Love Embrace of the Universe, the Earth (Mexico), Myself, Diego and Senor Xolotl* (1949), and *Flower of Life* (1943) that quest for the unattainable wholeness, manifest in the desire to return to the source, the infinite, the maternal body is articulated.

Kahlo entered her painting *Flower of Life* (1943) when she was asked to participate in the "Salon de la Flor", an exhibition of flower painting in Mexico City. Biographer Hayden Herrera highlights the overt sexual symbolism of the painting and points to the linking of cosmic and sexual forces where tropical flower has transformed into the female genitalia. The symbology is no doubt inspired by pre-Colombian Indian motifs, where the sun is a force of fertility. "An explosion of life-starting sperm from a phallus in *Flower of Life* (originally titled *Flame Flower*) can also be seen as rays of holy light descending on the fetus that emerges from a womb. A flash of lightning heightens the drama...indeed, about the time she painted *Sun and Life* she had another miscarriage; this time it was a lover's child not Rivera's. Three concerns impelled her to make art, she told a critic in 1944: her vivid memory of her own blood flowing during her childhood accident; her thoughts about birth, death, and the "conducting threads" of life; and her desire to be a mother."<sup>65</sup> The ovarian imagery evoked in *Flower of Life* (1943) may well be considered a form of self-portraiture. As Rivera noted, Kahlo was one of the first women to represent in painting those concerns exclusive to the experience of women. This work in particular is a represents the microcosmic interior of the female body, however the painting simultaneously gestures towards the infinite. The work 'expels man [woman] from

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<sup>63</sup>Franco, Jean, *Plotting Women:: Gender and Representation in Mexico*, Verso, London, 1989, p107.

<sup>64</sup>Chedgzoy, Kate, "Frida Kahlo's 'grotesque' bodies", in (Eds) Florence, Penny and Reynolds, Dee, *Feminist Subjects, multi-media: Cultural Methodologies*, Manchester University Press, New York, 1995, p45-46.

<sup>65</sup>Herrera, Hayden, "Patrons, Politics, Public Recognition", *Frida*, Harper and Row, New York, 1983, p 319.



himself [herself]<sup>66</sup> in the Surrealist sense. In producing a magnified image, but one that is enlarged distorted, an abherration of anatomical reality, reveals Kahlo's need to inspect and record her personal features.

The longing which haunts many of Kahlo's self-portraits is the constant yearning (desire) to merge once again with the maternal body - Kristeva's *semiotic*. Kristeva describes the semiotic as '*a modality which bears the most archaic memories of our link with the maternal body... and where a sort of self-eroticism is indissociable from the experience of (m)other.*'<sup>67</sup>In these paintings, surreal landscapes evoke the macrocosmic and microcosmic, and aspects of Kahlo's own physical self are depicted as fused with a symbolic universe. Works such as these create a relationship with the viewer, signalling the viewer's own merging with the painting, the subject's own sublime aesthetic experience and desire to return to the maternal body, to be One. Kristeva posits a necessary relationship of abjection with the maternal body, an image of femininity, thus the female body becomes "the privileged signifier of abjection, emblem of the most agonising ambivalence of subjectivity: the desired and feared dissolution of identity which is associated with engulfment by the body of the mother, by sexual passion, or by the death drive...Hence its relevance to Kahlo's paintings...Their troubling combination of beauty and horror enables the viewer to take pleasure in the lusciously depicted body and the returned gaze of the (m)other."<sup>68</sup> While Kahlo did not depict her bus accident in paint, she did represent the accident as a sketch in her intimate diary *Accident* (1926), pencil on paper, 20 x 27 cm. This decisive event in Kahlo's life was to have a distinct impact on her life as an artist..."The steel handrail had literally skewered her body at the level of the abdomen; entering her left side, it had come out through her vagina.

"**I lost my virginity**", she said.<sup>69</sup> The surreal dream scapes of her pictures would possess the fragility and horror of this original moment. Like the depictions of the martyred saints, or the Aztec blood sacrifices, or Goya's depictions of the Spanish bull-fights, Kahlo's repertoire of poses in her self-portraits employ emblems of suffering, passion and grief. Reflected in the mirror of her paintings is envisioned self- mastery of her body that was in reality crushed in that bus accident. According to medical records, Kahlo underwent thirty five surgical operations between the ages of 18 years and 47 years. Kahlo's biographer, Hayden Herrera, points out that her illness allowed her to play out the twin roles of tragic victim and heroic sufferer. "Wounded, weeping, cut open and bleeding, she is still always survivor.

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<sup>66</sup>Lomas, Thomas, "Inscribing alterity: transactions of self and other in Miro self-portraits", in Koerner, Joseph Leo, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art*, The University of Chicago Press, London and Chicago, 1993, p169.

<sup>67</sup>Cited by Chedgzoy, Kate Ibid. Kristeva, Julia, 'A question of subjectivity'. Interview with Susan Sellers in *Women's Review* 12, 1986, p19-22.[my italics]

<sup>68</sup>Chedgzoy, Kate, "Frida Kahlo's 'grotesque' bodies", in (Eds) Florence, Penny and Reynolds, Dee, *Feminist Subjects, multi-media: Cultural Methodologies*, Manchester University Press, New York, 1995, p47.

<sup>69</sup>Herrera, Hayden, *Frida : A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, Harper and Row, New york, 1983, p49.

The steely determination with which she transformed into a fuel for art, and art into a means of survival is evident in every brushstroke. She painted herself as she felt to be within and as she saw herself to be from without, the first Kahlo hurt, the second was heroic. These two aspects of Kahlo never seem to merge in her self-portraits, but in their disjunction Kahlo becomes the sufferer becomes Kahlo the voyeur of her own suffering...Painting self-portraits may also have been a form of exorcism: by projecting the pain outward onto a replica of herself..."<sup>70</sup>

Kate Chedgzoy argues in "Frida Kahlo's 'grotesque' bodies", that in 1925 when Kahlo the eighteen year old pre-medical school student suffered the terrible injuries of a bus crash, according to an eye-witness, "...as Frida lay on the road, her pelvis crushed, pierced through the womb and vagina by a metal rod, somehow her clothes were torn off and her naked body was showered with gold pigment which passers by had been carrying...Even at this moment of utter physical pain and abjection, her body was made into an object to be displayed and looked at. And if the objectivity of the account is questionable, it nevertheless testifies eloquently to the desire to convert Kahlo's lived experience into a sort of bizarre art object."<sup>71</sup> The contemporary writers, scholars, critics and art historians that Chedgzoy speaks of, have perhaps followed Kahlo's own lead in turning her life into a "sort of bizarre art object". The act of self-portraiture is an impulse driven by a motivation to articulate the self aesthetically. In representing her various *selves*, Kahlo invented her own 'identity' through the creation of an innovative feminine iconography.

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<sup>70</sup>Herrera, Hayden, *Frida Kahlo: The Palette, the Pain, and the Painter*, in *Frida*, Harper & Row, New York, 1983, p 60.

<sup>71</sup>Chedgzoy, Kate, "Frida Kahlo's 'grotesque' bodies", in (Eds) Florence, Penny and Reynolds, Dee, *Feminist Subjects, multi-media: Cultural Methodologies*, Manchester University Press, New York, 1995, p39.

### 3. *The Struggle for Identity* *Socialism, Myths of Origin, and the Birth of Mexico* *(La Indigena)*

*I never paint dreams. I paint what I see.*

Frida Kahlo<sup>72</sup>

Kahlo's search for identity was a source for her art and inseparable from (i) her subjective and tragic life experience, and (ii) the opening up of an extraordinary history of Mexico and Latin America - the epoch and culture where she lived. Kahlo's search for identity paralleled the modernist concerns, emerging after the military phase of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, in "deliberate opposition to the course of modernist art practised in the United States"<sup>73</sup>, and epitomised by the reactionary public mural art of 'the big three' ('los tres grandes') David Siqueiros, Diego Rivera, Jose Orozco and, whose nationalist aim was to recover a 'Mexico' before the Conquest. This process revitalised indigenous and popular culture repressed under the dominant European modernism and Spanish Catholic iconography. Kahlo's own political and spiritual identification with the Revolution induced her to fabricate her own birth date (Magdalena Carmen Frida Y Calderon, born in Coyoacan, Mexico City, July 6, 1907) to 1910 the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution. Kahlo joined the Communist Party in 1928 the same year that she met her future husband socialist muralist Diego Rivera. Rivera was at that time devoted to Communist Part activities as delegate of the Mexican Peasant League, general secretary of the Anti-Imperialist League, and editor of *El Liberador*. Kahlo would visit Rivera on his scaffold and he depicted her as a Communist militant in the *Insurrection* panel of his *Ballad of the Proletarian Revolution*.<sup>74</sup> In Kahlo's own words the age of twenty "I fell in love with Diego, and my parents did not like this because Diego was a Communist and because they said that he looked like a fat, fat, fat Brueghel. They said that it was like the marriage between an elephant and a dove."<sup>75</sup> Kahlo and Rivera were married by the town mayor in an unpretentious civil ceremony on 21 August 1929 at Coyacan's city hall. Rivera's expulsion from the Mexican Communist Party 3 October 1929, on the grounds of collaborating with the petit-bourgeois government of Mexico and contradicting the politics of the Comintern, did not deter the couples dedication to the Marxist ideology. Rivera continued to paint his socialist public murals both in Mexico and the United States.

Frida Kahlo's search for a personal vocabulary in paint was symbolic of the invention and birth of a new culture following the Mexican Revolution 1910-1920, a culture whose ambition was to overturn the colonial relations and reveal contemporary life composed of many diverse cultures. Her own utopian vision could be thought of as process - together with other artists, writers, thinkers involved in cultural production - that contributed to the growing

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<sup>72</sup>Fuentos, Carlos, 'Introduction', in *The Diary of Frida Kahlo : An Intimate Self-Portrait*, Bloomsbury, London, 1995, p14.

<sup>73</sup>Folgarait, Leonard, *So Far From Heaven : David Alfaro Siqueiros' The March of Humanity and Mexican Revolutionary Politics*, Cambridge University Press, London, 1987, p2.

<sup>74</sup>Herrera, Hayden, *Frida : A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, Harper and Row, New York, 1983, p94.

<sup>75</sup>Herrera, Hayden, *Frida : A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, Harper and Row, New York, 1983, p99.

articulation of that search. The poetic and visual images she produced represent both her personal life and yet are intimately connected in pre-Hispanic, colonial and post-Revolutionary history, providing a critique of contemporary and colonial culture. Kahlo's microcosmic self was then constituted within the framework of existing representational models - from pre-Colombian (Aztec), colonial Spanish, Independence (Diaz), Mexican Catholic, Jewish, and Occultist sources. These concerns are consistently gestured towards in her paintings *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Leon Trotsky (Between the Curtains)* (1937) and *Frida and Stalin* (1954).

*Frida and Stalin* (1954) painted toward the end of her life stands testament to her devotion to socialist politics and the "revolution". A vivid expression of her political faith, in this work Kahlo is seated in front of a massive portrait of Stalin, a globe of the earth in orbit next to his head. Stalin in this image is the original patriarch, father, life giver and even usurps an earlier work produced for her doctor *Self-Portrait with Portrait of Dr. Juan Farill* (1951) and a work produced in the same year *Marxism Will Give Health to the Sick* (1954). In *Marxism Will Give Health to the Sick* (1954) the omniscient hands of a grey haired Marx extend from the skies to embrace the ailing Frida in corset. Her crutches fly away from under her arms, as Marx's other hand strangles the throat of an American eagle. In all three pictures Stalin, Dr Juan Farill, and Marx substitute for the miracle-working saint of the retablo, "and Frida, the invalid, sits in a wheel chair, painting with her own blood, using her obliging heart as a palette."<sup>76</sup>

[Kahlo's]... subjectivity was raised as a condition constituted within the context of broader representations of national identity...She did this by consistently quoting, transferring, or mimicking already existing iconographic models and representations...This method exposed the relations and tensions which exist between mythic constructions of origin and profane allusions to the everyday: between the iconic reification and fetishization of the subject, be it woman or *la indigena*, and its desecration. And by this Kahlo's imagery reveals not only a historical and social density, but a continuing power to inform the present.<sup>77</sup>

The photographic portraits of Engels, Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Mao were a permanent fixture above the artists bed head. Kahlo locates the budding of her Communist consciousness at the age of seven, during the Tragic Decade (Mexican revolution). In her reminiscences she talks about her mother attending to the wounds of Zapista revolutionaries giving them corn tortilla.

The clear and precise emotion I remember about the Mexican Revolution made me join the Young Communists at the age of thirteen, but in 1914 the bullets began to hiss, I can still hear their extraordinary sound. There was propaganda for Zapata in the Friday markets of Coyocan in the form of ballads illustrated by Jose Guadalupe Posada, and they cost one centavo..."<sup>78</sup>

Frida Kahlo

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<sup>76</sup>Zamora, Martha, *Frida Kahlo: The Brush of Anguish*, Art Data, London, p114

<sup>77</sup>Mereweather, Charles, "Embodiment and Transformation : The Art of Frida Kahlo", in *The Art of Frida Kahlo*, Exhibition catalogue, 1990 Adelaide Festival in association with the Art Gallery of South Australia and the Art Gallery of Western Australia.

<sup>78</sup>Tibol, Raquel, *Frida Kahlo : An Open Life*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1983, p33-34.[My italics]

The fact that Frida may have made herself an almost constant subject in her work makes so many people feel that her painting is only a long autobiography...<sup>79</sup>

Raquel Tibol

The first page of Frida Kahlo's diary is inscribed "Painted 1916" below which rests a black and white photographic portrait of Frida laid out as if already dead, illustrated with a wreath of flowers, a pink ribbon, and a bird.

Reminiscent of a sumptuously adorned sugar skull sweet - *Calaveras*, a Mexican folk offering for *Dia de los Muertos* - 'the day of the dead', signifying in Kahlo's own words "death: very gay, a joke"<sup>80</sup>, Kahlo has humorously proclaimed she is nine years old. In the same way, contemporary biographical-fiction of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, referred to as "magical realism", contains literary images of the everyday reality in Mexico and Latin America, "part of the cultural stream, a spontaneous fusing of myth and fact, dream and vigil, reason and fantasy... *Don Quixote*, *Las Meninas*, *The Caprichos* of Goya, *The Aleph* by Borges, the paintings of Matta Lam, or Tamayo, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, add something to reality that was not there before. This is a project far more conscious and acute in societies where reality itself finds scarce political representation."<sup>22</sup>

Frida Kahlo's diary reveals, (spanning the mid-1940's to mid 1950's), the *journal intime* is an appealing genre, the predominant subject being specifically the 'self'. Viewing this private expression - which includes oil, watercolour and ink sketches - might be viewed as imposing at worst, voyeuristic at best. Indeed, the viewing of such material raises ethical questions in relation to its very publication (by the Banco de Mexico, trustee for the Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo Museum, Mexico), precisely because this is no artists sketchbook nor is it a journal of everyday occurrences, rather it is an expression of automatic writing / painting/ drawing - a **repository for feelings and images**. In this way it is possible to view such a **repository** of material as a sublimation of repressed psychic energies, analogous to the contents of the unconscious. The influences of Surrealism (while denied by the artist herself) are evidenced in this practise. In Freudian terms the **unconscious** (its memories, perceptions, and sensations) occupies a psychical locality with its own system and mechanisms - a succession of inscriptions and signs<sup>26</sup> - the contents of which only becomes accessible to the conscious domain once resistances have been overcome.<sup>81</sup>

If Kahlo's diary is understood as an *journal intime*, then the roughly fifty-five self-portraits Kahlo painted (nearly a third of her entire *oeuvre*), which were intended for public consumption, may be seen as constituting "autobiography". In the self-portraits painted there is a self-consciousness foregrounding sexuality subjectivity. Kahlo carefully constructs herself in a variety of settings, creating an artistic persona with an audience in mind. Before Kahlo, Western art was unused to images of birthing or miscarriage, double self-portraits with visible internal

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<sup>79</sup>Tibol, Raquel, *Frida Kahlo: An Open Life*, (trans. Elinor Randall), p126.

<sup>80</sup>Herrera, Hayden, *Frida : A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, Harper and Row, New York, 1983, p17.[my bold]

<sup>81</sup>Lapanche, J & Pontalis, J.B, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, Hogarth Press, London, 1988, p474.

organs or cross-dressing, as subjects for “high art”.<sup>82</sup>

The search for an identity in Kahlo’s self-portraits involves the revisiting a lost American Indian spirituality, and a type of religious art, in which birth is the ultimate myth. This myth of origin, as seen through the amazed eyes of Kahlo the foreigner, is claimed by Kahlo as her own Mexican heritage.<sup>83</sup> In opposition to the Spanish/ European tradition, with its Conquest origins, the Mexican Revolution produced a resurgence of all that was Mexican. This nationalist enterprise was articulated in the efforts of socialist muralist Diego Rivera, and it was from within this cultural and socialist intellectual milieu that Kahlo produced her painting. The search for origin in Indigenous mythology, architecture, and spirituality, referred to by some as a ‘Mexican Renaissance’, was formalised in the active collection and preservation of Indigenous and popular art by the couple Rivera and Kahlo, which they housed in a purpose built pyramid museum. Furthermore, the great cultural legacy of the “re-discovery” of this “lost” tradition is articulated in the quotation of this Mexican tradition in both Rivera and Kahlo’s art.

As distinct from husband Diego Rivera’s socialist agenda to achieve vast didactic murals, commissioned for public spaces, Kahlo’s small autobiographical paintings were not often created with exhibition in mind, but rather as a personal artistic compulsion. In many of these paintings Kahlo recasts the myths of origin, creating works that interpret her own life events dialectically. Working inside a Marxist ideological framework, the dualities within ancient Indian mythology and Spanish Catholic iconography are synthesised into an innovative feminine vocabulary. Just as the Madonna colonised the Aztec Mother Goddess Tlazolteotl, so Tlazolteotl now comes to colonise the Virgin Mary in Kahlo’s imaginary.

Works that bring into conversation these devotional symbols, such as *My Birth* (1932), oil on sheet metal, *My Nurse and I* (1937), oil on sheet metal, *My Grandparents, My Parents and I* (1936) oil on sheet metal, *A Few Small Nips* (1935), oil on sheet metal, and *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932), oil on sheet metal, to name but a few, trace a surreal map of Kahlo’s physical, psychic, social, political, and cosmological movement through time. The pictures act as secularised *retablos* where there has been no miraculous divine intervention and there is no offering of thanks for a salvation that has not taken place. In juxtaposition, however, these works humorously parody the home altar images of divine aid, and invoke the colonised Aztec symbology that has been overlaid by Spanish Catholicism.

This period of works suggest a struggle. or quest to establish an identity, where Kahlo the artist casts herself as *motherless child* and *childless mother*. The autobiographical narrative runs through the works, referencing sorrow at childlessness and perhaps a nostalgic yearning for her own childhood. Simultaneously there is the socialist

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<sup>82</sup>Lowe, M. Sarah, ‘Essay’, in *The Diary of Frida Kahlo : An Intimate Self-Portrait*, Bloomsbury, London, 1995, p25.

<sup>83</sup>de Larrea, Irene Herner, “Frida Kahlo: My Birth”, in (ed) Billeter, Erika, *The Blue House: The World of Frida Kahlo*, Exhibition catalogue , Museum of Fine Arts Houston & Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, 1993.

nationalist narrative, a preoccupation with and search for Mexican roots. This is strongly articulated in the painting *My Nurse and I* (1937), where an adult Kahlo's head is attached to the body of an infant, suckling on the breast of her Indian wet nurse. In the picture space, milk drops rain from the night sky fertilising the luscious Mexican ground, doubling the breast milk oozing from the nipples of the nurse to nurture Frida. The infant Kahlo's white skin contrasts with the dark indigenous skin of her wet nurse whose face is concealed by a traditional Aztec mask. Hayden Herrera interprets this work as a declaration of her faith in the continuity of Mexican culture, in the idea that Mexico's ancient heritage is reborn in each new generation, and that Frida the artist continues to be nourished by her Indian ancestry. The droplets of milk from sky and breast remind the viewer of the repeated tears motif in the portraits, suggesting a secularisation of the Catholic image of the weeping virgin and transforming Christ's passion into a socialist nationalistic passion. In addition the tears evoke the physical and psychic pain of her incapacitated body. The tears/ rain/ milk that feed the soil/ soul dialectically fuse the personal and the political struggle for socialism/ self and suggest that Kahlo's invention of self was intertwined with the broader political concerns and Mexican nationhood. Herrera writes that "More and more in these years, the ethic of *Mexicanidad* pervaded Frida's existence on many levels: it was a style, a political stance, and psychological support. It expressed itself in her behaviour and her appearance, in the decoration of her home and her art."<sup>84</sup>

The concerns produced in *My Nurse and I* (1937) are revisited two years later in another work *The Earth Itself (Two Nudes in the Jungle)* (1939). Rather than representing her infant self (the Mexican people) at the bosom of her Indian nurse (Indian heritage), she places an adult pale skinned girl lying in the lap of her Indian friend. As the friend strokes her hair, wild roots take on giant proportions and Amazonian jungle leaves engulf the couple. As with *My Nurse and I* (1937), the indigenous maternal figure nourished her (the people of Mexico) with pre-Colombian culture. Herrera points out the pre-Colombian stress on magic and ritual, its cyclical view of time, its idea of cosmic and biological forces working together, and the importance of fertility were all influences on Kahlo's articulation of self in her self-portraits. This was perhaps fed by Rivera's own social mural art that re-worked pre-Colombian cosmological imagery to define a revolutionary socialist nationalism. Kahlo takes on many of Rivera's concerns, feeding into her iconography of self (and no doubt Kahlo's preoccupations fed into Rivera's art).

In the instance of Rivera's monumental *Detroit Industry* (1932-33), Fresco, Detroit Institute of Arts, Terry Smith, argues that the employment of "an early Renaissance revival space with a neo-Baroque immediacy...[was] Not a comic-book illustration of the Communist manifesto, but its framework of values is parallel with that text and aspects of subsequent radical history...Its story begins [the east-west orientation of the mural] with the imagery of germination - human, organic, and inorganic... While the harvest-goddesses in each corner panel, and the fruits of the earth below them, convey the fecundity of natural growth, this wall already contains hints of the counter

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<sup>84</sup>Herrera, Hayden, *Frida : A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, Harper and Row, New York, 1983, p219.

movement that will gradually increase in power through the cycle...".<sup>85</sup> In another text Smith states "...against the dramatic force of the Portrait of Detroit mural courtyard at the Institute of Arts, what possible purchase could be imagined for a small (13 3/4 by 18 1/2 inch) votive *Self-Portrait* on metal, rather crudely painted in archaizing, perhaps even naively primitive style, by someone known (if at all) only as the wife of the fabulous living legend Diego Rivera, someone primarily intent on making only a personal record of her visit to the car capital ?"<sup>86</sup>

Kahlo's painting, as distinct from her husband Diego Rivera's mural art, was not always produced with a pre-meditated public program. As Smith discusses in *Making the Modern*, Kahlo's work was often produced under the constraints of domestic "women's" work - decorative patterning, done for the entertainment and interest of close friends, as a "hobby", an occupation for the lively mind imprisoned within a broken body..."<sup>87</sup> It must be noted that, Kahlo did have a personal studio dedicated to the production of artworks. In response to Rivera's public murals Kahlo's works *My Dress Hangs There* (1933), *Self Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States* (1932) might be interpreted as a reply to or a reworking of the key struggles in Rivera's *Detroit Industry* (1932-33) fresco. *My Dress Hangs There* (1933) or *New York* (1933) portrays the urban metropolis of New York from the sky. Amidst the neo-classical, Deco, Industrial, and religious architecture, Frida Kahlo's dress is pegged on a makeshift clothesline hoisted between a flushing toilet and shining trophy. In this portrait Kahlo is absent, her Tehuana costume is all that remains. Smith writes "Apart from the later still lives and the intermittent portraits of others, this work is a rare absence of Kahlo's staring face and broken body. Amid the pileup of New York buildings, particularly those of Wall Street, above newspaper cutouts of rioting crowds and lengthy breadlines, between column rising out of burning buildings and overflowing garbage bins on a line strung from a toilet bowl and victory cup, hangs Kahlo's Tehuana dress, empty. Her disgust in Gringolandia has grown so great that she removes even herself...Capitalist New York had, of course, just destroyed Rockefeller's Central mural...It is her most overt picturing of political conflict, and thus becomes companion piece to *Self Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States*."<sup>88</sup> Kahlo's painting can thus be understood as political articulation, in reference to the international socialist political struggle, a political and public response to the American domination of Latin America (Mexico) both economically, politically, aesthetically and ideologically. These works speak in images that convey a highly developed political and intellectual consciousness, a far cry from "domestic decorative patterning done for the entertainment of friends". Rather, these works, while small in scale in relation to the public art of Rivera, communicate the tenacious and empowering voice of one doubly marginalised, often as exotic other (the feminine and the Latin American).

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<sup>85</sup>Smith, Terry, "Frida Kahlo: Marginality and Modernity", *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1993, p209-211.

<sup>86</sup> Smith, Terry, "Marginality and Modernity: The case of Frida Kahlo", in *American Art and Society*, August, 1989.

<sup>87</sup>Smith, Terry, "Frida Kahlo: Marginality and Modernity", *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1993, p249.

<sup>88</sup> Smith op cit p254.



The artist renders herself, Frida Kahlo, in *Self Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States* (1932) at the intersection of the modern capitalist industrial Ford plant and the ancient ruins of pre-Colombian Mexico. The picture space is divided into two sectors (thesis and anti-thesis). On the capitalist right an American flag of stars and stripes emerges from the industrial smoke stacks powered by rhizomes of electronic wiring, diametrically opposite, on the socialist Mexican left, an ancient pyramid rises from indigenous statues and fecund plant life with organic roots that intertwine with the electronic ones. Frida stands between the two ideological/ physical worlds wearing her Tehuana dress and holding a cigarette in one hand and a small Mexican flag in another. In the sky above the unity of cosmic and terrestrial forces in the Aztec symbology evoked by the sun and moon, where the eternal war between light and dark; the idea of duality in life and death; light and dark; past and present; day and night; and male and female is synthesised into a socialist vision of the West versus the alien other Frida (Mexico).

In these works the priority accorded with modernism to self-expression, free play of aesthetic sensibility, to the sanctity of individualism is disrupted by Kahlo's withdrawal from high-art individuality. And as Smith argues the "paintings are not, therefore, primarily portraits of a "self" : they are picturings of the construction of a persona as a set of effects. It is this which she is urging against Rivera's grand schemes of global and continental unity - the "reality" of this kind of grounding, particularly its psychic and physical cost. There is of course great variation within Kahlo's limited repertoire of faces....The originality of Kahlo's work, the political significance of her perspective, is that it searches through the larger forces active at the time in terms of the domain of the specific. It sorts these forces through an insistence on experiences usually relegated in high art to the peripheries of bad taste or trivia: jealousy, long-term physical pain, private griefs, the small tortures of marriage, the weakness of the invalid, the alienation of the medical subject. "<sup>89</sup>

Once again Kahlo is reinterpreting the macrocosmic themes of the myth of origin and the revival/ rebirth of all that was Mexican in the socialist revolutionary period through the personal act of self-portraiture. This map of self representationally questions the borders drawn around the canons and 'metanarratives' of Western tradition which expresses a uniquely masculine rationalist Enlightenment self. But in comparison with Rivera this is not achieved didactically but sardonically through the employment of visual puns, parody and horror present in her work. In many ways Kahlo's self-portraits mediate the interdependent paradigms of *self* in the context of socialism, Mexican nationalism, the residue of the European - Spanish Catholicism, the revival of ancient Indian culture - and its manifestation in village folk tradition.

These cultural contexts are historicized as ways of knowing, experience, explanation, and understanding, revealing the way in which the *self* is shaped in and through these narrative structures informing and transforming Kahlo's

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<sup>89</sup>Smith op cit p257.

feminine sexual self. Thus opening up an understanding of self that is indefinitely and continually made and remade through the social and the cultural, disrupting a static notion of self identical to other “selves” with its destiny in a teleological narrative enshrining the individual and “his uniqueness”.<sup>90</sup> This is achieved representationally through the device of two underlying motifs which appear in the self-portraits, (i) the opposition barrenness/fertility as symbolised by the figure of the *Aztec Mother Goddess Tlazolteotl*, and (ii) the image of the weeping *Virgin, Mater Dolorosa*, the most important of representations of Mary without Christ.

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<sup>90</sup>Susan J Hekman, “Modernism, Postmodernism, and Feminism”, Gender and Knowledge: Elements of a Postmodern Feminism, Polity Press, 1990, pp2

## 4. Mexican Folk Retablo (Catholicism) & Ex-Votive Painting

Frida Kahlo's first painting on sheet metal *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932) was modelled on Mexican ex-votive painting, where the Catholic image of divine maternity, the Virgin Mary (and its regional manifestation in Mexico as Our Lady of Guadalupe) is fused with indigenous myths of creation. The cult of the Virgin Mary was first introduced to Mexico when Catholicism was brought to Mexico in the earliest days of the conquest by Cortes. This was reinforced in 1531 with the appearance of the Virgin to the Indian neophyte, Juan Diego on the hill of Tepeyac outside the Mexican capital. Tradition would have it that a cloak appeared miraculously to Juan Diego, full of roses and upon which the Virgin's image was miraculously imprinted.<sup>91</sup> An important aspect of the Mexican folk retablo is the depiction of the saints, their various functions, and popularity. "Ever illness had its protection, each worry a helper, each social station, profession, celebrates a patron. In droughts, floods meteorological dangers, on trips, saints are resorted to...often the powers ascribed to Indian Gods were transferred to a corresponding Indian saint...Tonantzin, was replaced by the Virgin of Guadalupe"<sup>92</sup> In Kahlo's paintings, likened to secular retablos, the Catholic saints are replaced by her own iconography, derivative of her own life experiences and sufferings.

Kahlo's mixed ethnic origin connects to the Indigenous/Spanish Catholic Mestizo experience and simultaneously the European Jewish-Hungarian German exilic experience. Mestizo creativity drew consciously and heavily on its own heritage for the first time, and as a result the peculiarly Mexican art expressed in mural paintings followed the manner of the ancient American civilisation.<sup>93</sup>

At the centre of this was the mestizo or more precisely the mestizo woman. The mestizo became the symbol and reality of national unity and the bedrock of nationality. As an emblem of progress and the future, after the Revolution, Guadalupe was fetishized as a symbol of the continuing sacrifice women must make for the welfare of nation and people. Mexico's Revolution constitutes the pinnacle of social evolution and fertile regeneration from the soil of the Americas.<sup>94</sup>

Kahlo's quotation of the Mexican Catholic iconographic style in her painting evokes and parodies the production of the retablo or ex-voto tradition, dating back to Byzantine religious art. Retablo painting followed the Spanish to the new world and "pictorial stories of divine aid, constitution a holy offering of thanks for the holy person invoked, were places in Mexican churches as soon as they were built."<sup>95</sup> In the conversion of the deeply ingrained image

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<sup>91</sup>Gliffords, Gloria Fraser, *Mexican Folk Retablos*, New Mexico Press, 1995, p53.

<sup>92</sup>Gliffords, Gloria Fraser, *Mexican Folk Retablos*, New Mexico Press, 1995, p68.

<sup>93</sup>Fehrenbach, T.R, *Fire & Blood: A History of Mexico*, Da Capo Press, New York, 1995, p580.

<sup>94</sup>Mereweather, Charles, "Embodiment and Transformation: The Art of Frida Kahlo", in *The Art of Frida Kahlo*, Exhibition catalogue, 1990 Adelaide Festival in association with the Art Gallery of South Australia and the Art gallery of Western Australia, p13.

<sup>95</sup>Gliffords, Gloria Fraser, *Mexican Folk Retablos*, New Mexico Press, 1995, p143.

worshipping tradition of indigenous Indian cosmology to that of Spanish Catholicism, the desire to possess an image often meant that Christian personage was transplanted onto an existing deity. This created the demand for the production of painting, statues and prints depicting the new saints. The retablos of nineteenth century Mexico were painted on tin due to durability and relative inexpense of the material. The small oil paintings (to be placed in home altars) were depended upon to remedy anything and everything and were characteristically produced by anonymous village artisans, who were either commissioned to produce a special offering or peddled door-to-door and at church stands. Kahlo's self-portraits ironically gesture towards a folk tradition practiced by untrained and anonymous village artisans from the provinces, mimicking the stylistic twitch characterised by the very anonymity of the artist to narrate a story about Kahlo's own interiority, politics and geographic moment in time. Kahlo incorporates through parody the folk tradition of Mexican religious art, in which a black Mexican humour - present in the popular prints of illustrator Jose Guadalupe Posada - is often identified with Surrealism.

A picture conjuring, and indeed inspired by, this Posada-esque black humour is the terrifying work *A Few Small Snips* (1935). According to Hayden Herrera the picture (also referred to as *A Few Small Nips*) is based upon a newspaper account of a drunken man who threw his girlfriend onto a bed and stabbed her twenty times. Brought before the law he protested " *But I only gave her a few small nips!*"<sup>96</sup> In Kahlo's painting one apprehends the moment after the act of murder, the killer stands over his dead girlfriend victim, wielding the bloodied murder weapon - a dagger, as she is splayed on the bed slashed to death. The naked corpse is covered in wounds, and recall the autobiographical wounds Kahlo depicts in many of her self-portrait works. Within this horrific comic strip world, Kahlo makes reference to image of the dead Christ descended from the Cross, "one of the woman's lifeless arms hangs downward, her wounded and bleeding palm open toward us. Streams of blood flow from the fingers and splash onto the acrid, greenish-yellow floor (yellow, Frida later said, stood for "insanity, sickness, fear"). As if the small sheet of tin cannot contain the horror, splotches of blood continue out onto the painter's frame, becoming life-size red splashes."<sup>97</sup> The painting evokes the urban Mexican stereotypes of the *macho* and his *chingada*, the brutalized victim. *Chingada* is a common Mexican curse [and literally means *to screw*]. In the words of Octavio Paz "The verb [*chingar*]...denotes violence, an emergence from oneself to penetrate another by force... The verb is masculine, active, cruel: it stings, wounds, gashes, stains and it provokes a bitter, resentful satisfaction. The person who suffers this action is passive, inert and open, in contrast to the active, aggressive and closed person who inflicts it."<sup>98</sup> Looking over this exhibition of atrocity in *A Few Small Snips* (1935) a dainty pair of doves, one white and one black, display a retablo-esque banner in their beaks that reads "Unos Cuantos Piquetitos!" (A Few Small Snips).

While the painting *A Few Small Snips* (1935) is not a self-portrait work, evidence suggests the work is autobiographical. Martha Zamora's *Frida Kahlo*, based on oral history research, recounts Kahlo's grief over her

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<sup>96</sup>Herrera, Hayden, *Frida : A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, Harper and Row, New York, 1983, p180.

<sup>97</sup>Herrera op cit p180.

<sup>98</sup>Herrera op cit p180.

husband Diego Rivera's dalliances with other woman. Zamora points to Kahlo's divorce from Rivera in 1939, following her devastation over his affair with American film star Paulette Godard, as precipitating the production of the only large-scale work on canvas, *The Two Fridas* (1939). This double self-portrait was painted a few months after their separation and details the self divided. Set against Magritte like cloud scape, the two Frida's sit side by side on a bench holding hands and connected by externalised veins. The Frida Diego no longer loves on the left wears a Victorian, dressed in an elaborate white lacy outfit. Her right hand grasps a pair of surgical pincers that are blocking the left end of the external vein. The Victorian Frida wears her heart on her chest and the viewer has an internal perspective of the inner valves of this Frida's heart. The Frida Diego loves on the right is dressed in traditional Tehuana costume, her left hand is holding a miniature portrait of Diego Rivera as a child that is blocking the right end of the external vein. "From the crimson frame of the oval shaped miniature springs a long red vein that also resembles an umbilical cord emerging from a placenta. Diego's egg-shaped portrait thus seems to stand for both the lost baby and a lost lover. To Frida, Diego was both. The veins wind around the Tehuana Frida's arm, continues through her heart, then leaps across space to the other Frida, circling her neck, entering her broken heart, and finally ending on her lap, where she shuts off its flow with the surgical pincers. A note to Diego in Frida's journal says "My blood is the miracle that travels in the veins of the air from my heart to yours." In anger and despair at the divorce she cuts off this magical flow with pincers. But the blood continues to drip, and in her white lap forms a pool that overflows..."<sup>99</sup>

The Frida on the right wears her heart on her chest, but the viewer can't see inside this heart. The exposed hearts are a literal device to display the pain in love she felt. The unloved Victorian Frida on the right has her dress torn, exposing the Tehuana Frida's heart as intact.

This grief was further heightened when Diego entered into a relationship with her younger sister Cristina Kahlo, who had recently modelled for his mural painting. While Kahlo inevitably pardoned both her husband and her sister, it is believed that this painting, along with another self-portrait work *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940), were a record of the pain in Diego's infidelity. Full of anguish over the affair, Frida no longer wore the Tehuana costumes Diego encouraged her to wear and she cut off all her long hair, shortly afterwards producing *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940). In this painting a musical banner embellishes top of the picture, the lyrics and notes of a popular song are displayed: "Look, if I used to love you, it was because of your hair, now that your *pelona* [bald] , I don't love you anymore." In the self-portrait captures Kahlo donning a oversized mens suit, sitting on a yellow chair, wielding the pair of scissors she has recently used to cut off all her long hair. Her black hair covers the floor. It is as if the *macho* brutalizer and brutalized *chingada* victim of *A Few Small Snips* (1935) have composited into Frida, the hair motif replacing the blood, and the retablo banner replaced by musical notation. The self-portrait works bring a voice to Kahlo's anger and outrage over her humiliation. In the production of these secular autobiographical *retablos*,

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<sup>99</sup>Herrera op cit p180.

Kahlo's life events unfold and are projected onto the canvas, creating an active representation of her interior world. This work was preceded by intensely intimate autobiographical self-portraits *My Birth* (1932) and *Henry Ford Hospital*. (1932),

In *My Birth* (1932) Kahlo produces one of the first, and arguably the most horrific, modernist visualisation of a woman in labour, painting a shrouded corpse in delivery of a dead birthing infant. "We see the infant's large head emerging between the mother's spread legs from the doctor's vantage point. Heavy, joined eye-brows identify the child as Frida. Blood covers the inert, drooping head and skinny neck. The baby looks dead...A sheet covering the woman's head and chest, as if she had already died in childbirth, emphasizes the total exposure of delivery. As a substitute for the mother's head, on the wall directly above her is a painting of another greiving mother, the Virgin of Sorrows pierced by swords, bleeding and weeping. Frida said that she included the Virgin of Sorrows in *My Birth* as part "part of a memory image, not for symbolic reasons." It is a detail of furnishings remembered from childhood from childhood - just the kind of object her devoutly Catholic mother would have cherished, The bed, said Frida, was her mother's bed; both she and her sister Cristina were born in it." <sup>100</sup> This scene is re-visited in *Henry Ford Hospital*. (1932), where Kahlo renders her tearful haemorrhaging (miscarrying) brown female body rests on the hospital bed.

*My Birth* (1932) according to Smith represents the "triple death of the "mother" - as woman who dies in childbirth, who produces a stillborn child (which is also [Frida] herself), and who fails (dies) as a birth giver. <sup>101</sup> Below a scroll unfolds across the painting, as empty as the room is spare and comfortless: "The feminine sphere is stripped of reassurance. The haven of male fantasy is replaced by the experience of pain, including the pain associated with her physical inability to live out a feminine role in motherhood."<sup>102</sup> These issues are poignantly explored in this painting. Pictorial representations of birth was a subject not dealt with in the traditional of Western painting until this time. The candour with which Kahlo portrays birth, sexuality and the female body is revolutionary. The direct inspiration for *My Birth* (1932) is pre-Colombian sculpture, in particular one of the most important motifs in Mexican culture: Tlazolteotl, an Aztec stone sculpture from the beginning of the sixteenth century (Goddess of impurity, the earth, the moon, carnal love and confession). The deity gives birth to an adult male warrior. In *My Birth* (1932) above the headboard hangs a painting of the weeping Virgin Mater Dolorosa watching over the tragic event with her seven daggers of pain. This image is amongst the most important of representations of Mary without Christ, the quintessential mourning mother, usually portrayed in a greiving attitude, head covered, hands clasped,

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<sup>100</sup>Herreraop cit p157.

<sup>101</sup>Jacob and Downs, *The Rouge*, and Cynthia Newman Helms, ed *Diego Rivera: A Retrospective* (Detroit: Founders Society, Detroit Institute of Arts, BUR-6-3, in Smith, Terry, *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1993,p 258.

<sup>102</sup>Letter , May 27, 1931, from William Valentiner, Director of the DIA, Clyde H. Burroughs Records, Museum Archives, Detroit Institute of Arts, BUR-6-3, in Smith, Terry, *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1993,p 258.

and tears streaming down her face. Characteristically there are seven dagges at her chest, alluding to Luke 2: 35 when upon presenting Christ to the temple mary was told that a sword would pierce her soul. The daggers seem to specifically symbolize the death of Christ, for the symbols of the passion are included.<sup>103</sup> The absence of the baby Jesus in the icon painting within Kahlo's painting is mirrored by the already dead birthing infant. *My Birth* (1932) could be evidence of her recent miscarriage in the Henry Ford Hospital, Detroit, and parallels Kahlo's representation of the tragedy in her painting *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932).

The tearful brown female body of Kahlo haemorrhaging on the bed *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932) might be likened to an image of the weeping Virgin, Mater Dolorosa, the quintessential mourning mother that is usually portrayed in a grieving attitude with tears streaming down her face, symbolizing the death of Christ. Ironically, in Kahlo's retablo the space upon which the anonymous retablo artisan would have inscribed a written text, a receipt bill for physical or spiritual boons received, is written simply "Henry Ford Hospital Detroit" and "Julio De 1932".

The painting represents both the figural and the discursive, the interior and exterior world, the material and imaginary reality, the world of the microcosmic and the macrocosmic. Just as the divine figure of intervention in the Mexican ex-votive style floats on the surface of the naive picture space, Kahlo substitutes floating symbolic objects for the usual holy images in the surreal desert landscape, without the conventions of three dimensional illusion or perspective. In this painting a wounded Kahlo lies upon her hospital bed in limbo between the United States of America and Mexico. Above and below the convalescent Frida angelically floats (i) a medical model of the female reproductive organs; (ii) a foetus in an advanced state of development; (iii) a snail; (iv) a piece of industrial machinery; (v) a lavender orchid in bloom; and (vi) the skeleton of a human pelvis. In this surreal picture space Frida Kahlo, reminiscent of Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrows, weeps at the deserted border of industry and a body that has yet to be capitalised upon, in the patriarchal sense, lacking in productive (reproductive) capacity. The dream-like painting uses a physical wound to refer to a psychic injury, symbolically connecting root-like (umbilical) red ribbons from external objects to what points to Kahlo's uterus. Kahlo's miscarriage in July 1932 at the Henry Ford Hospital, Detroit is caricatured with the dark campesina humour of Posada and indeed Mexican and Latin American ritualised brutality - a mix of the brutality of an Aztec sacrifice and the poetry of blood pervading Spanish bull-fights and cock-fights, relishing in the macabre - like the little clay hospital scenes that could be bought in the village markets "showing doctors and nurses gleefully brandishing the severed head or the extracted heart of the patient who lies on the operating table. On the toys bases appear captions such as "Por Amor" (For Love), "Ultima Lucha!" (Last Battle), or "Ni Modo Cuate!" (Too Bad Pal). Or one thinks of the sugar coffins with tiny skeletons that are made as edible treats for The Day of the Dead...".<sup>104</sup> The depiction of the haemorrhaging Kahlo, in *Henry Ford Hospital*, self-reflexively points to Kahlo's own birth and the act of creation involved in the production of the work of art. Production for Kahlo would have been inextricably linked to national identity, given her dedication to socialism.

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<sup>103</sup>Gliffords, Gloria Fraser, *Mexican Folk Retablos*, New Mexico Press, 1995, p45.

<sup>104</sup>Herrera, Hayden, *Frida : A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, Harper and Row, New York, 1983, p187.

While not produced in chronological order, it could be argued that an historic and autobiographical map emerges from analysis of this body of self-portraits. Evidence attests to these pictures being painted the year in which Kahlo's mother died and also refer to the recent death of her unborn child (miscarriage). Kahlo has invented a innovative vocabulary and symbology in paint with which to represent the self in the context of broader political and religious concerns. Indeed the innovative vocabulary carefully articulates the specificity of her feminine sexual subjectivity.



## 5. *European Surrealism & Latin American Modernism* *"Ribbon Around A Bomb"*

I never knew I was a Surrealist till Andre Breton came to Mexico and told me...And it is doubtless true that in many ways my painting is related to that of the Surrealists. But I never had the intention of creating a work that could be considered to fit in that classification<sup>105</sup>

Frida Kahlo

Andre Breton's canonical text *Surrealism and Painting*, devotes an entire chapter, "Frida Kahlo de Rivera", to what he wrote was the convulsive beauty and surrealist virtues to be found in Kahlo's work. Breton was charmed by Mexico which he fantasized as "the Surrealist place *par excellence*"<sup>106</sup> This he believed was expressed specifically in Kahlo's art, which was delicately situated at that point of intersection between the political (philosophical) line and the artistic line that may unite in a single revolutionary consciousness.<sup>107</sup> It was the special contribution of Kahlo's painting, that Breton understood as the naive work of a genius who had stumbled upon that blend of reverie, cruelty, and sexuality<sup>108</sup>, and intuited the tenets and practices of Surrealism. He wrote "...there is no art more exclusively feminine, in the sense that, in order to be as seductive as possible, it is only too willing to play at being absolutely pure and absolutely pernicious. The art of Frida Kahlo is a ribbon around a bomb."<sup>109</sup>

The catalogue text for the *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti* exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery, 1983, suggests that Breton's enchantment with Kahlo's art was heightened by her association with socialist Leon Trotsky. Living in exile from Russia in Mexico, Trotsky and his wife stayed at Frida Kahlo's Casa Azul (Blue House), her painting *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Leon Trotsky (Between the Curtains)* (1937) hung on Trotsky's study wall.<sup>110</sup> Before Trotsky was assassinated in Mexico, Kahlo created a self-portrait for him that presents herself standing between the parting of two curtains, in the manner of a debutante, *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Leon Trotsky (Between the Curtains)* (1937). Clapsed in neatly folded hands Kahlo holds a bouquet of flowers and a note inscribed in Spanish "*To Trotsky with great affection, I dedicate this painting November 7, 1937. Frida Kahlo, in San Angel, Mexico.*". November 7 was the anniversary date of the October Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and Trotsky's own birthday.

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<sup>105</sup>Herrera, Hayden, *Frida*, Bloomsbury, London, 1989, p254-5.

<sup>106</sup>Chadwick, Whitney, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1985, p87.

<sup>107</sup>Breton, Andre, "Frida Kahlo de Rivera", *Surrealism and Painting*, Harper and Row, New York, 1972.

<sup>108</sup>Mulvey, Laura & Wollen, Peter in "Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti", catalogue text for the exhibition Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti held at the Whitechapel Gallery, 1993, in Mulvey, Laura and Wollen, Peter, "Frida Kahlo/Tina Modotti", in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 1982, p 81.

<sup>109</sup>Breton, Andre, "Frida Kahlo de Rivera", *Surrealism and Painting*, Harper and Row, New York, 1972, p144.

<sup>110</sup>Cited by Mulvey & Wollen p 81.

The Surrealist nostalgia for unity recovered was articulated in Breton's hope for the dialectical unity of art and revolution, the "internal, oneiric, psychic revolution should be inseparable from the external, political, material, liberating revolution. The marriage of Marx and Freud."<sup>111</sup> Breton's writing indicates that for the surrealists Kahlo's art contained all that was celebrated by Surrealism, the liberation of the unconscious and the exotic, and these essential qualities were neatly aligned with Breton's humanist vision of femininity as untamed nature. This view denies Kahlo agency as the subject of her own personal/political history and her artistic production, where there is danger of emphasising the body, personal emotion, motherhood, and the archetypal image of woman as victim.<sup>112</sup> Indeed, this position does little to address the active role Kahlo played inventing a vocabulary of the feminine in art that succeeded in questioning the cultural values of western colonialism in Mexico. "In fact her current status embodies both aspects of the modernist 'other', the feminine and the unconscious, which are consistently used to characterise Latin America itself."<sup>113</sup>

Ironically, given the dreamscapes evoked on her canvasses, Kahlo speaks not of painting her dreams, but of painting what she saw. Kahlo turned to her own reality and self in search for artistic inspiration and a female muse. As distinct from the male Surrealists that projected their masculine desire upon the image of the female form, Kahlo looked to her self as subject. Her body and the spaces of femininity it inhabited were not subjected to the gaze of the voyeur, but rather the familiar and spectacular was rendered in the banal visualisation and acceptance of self. "The duality of the Mexican Frida Kahlo's... exterior persona constantly reinvented with costume and ornament, and interior image nourished on the pain of a body crippled in a trolley-bus accident... invests her painting with a haunting complexity and a narrative quality which disturbs in its ambiguity... Kahlo's *Broken Column* (1944)... reinforces the woman artists's use of the mirror to assert the duality of being, the self as observer and observed... The self-image in the work of women artists in the Surrealist movement becomes the focus for a dialogue between the constructed social being and the powerful forces of instinctual life, which Surrealism celebrated as the revolutionary tool that would overthrow the control exerted by the conscious mind."<sup>114</sup> In Kahlo's surreal picture spaces Kahlo returns the gaze and the observer becomes observed.

Kahlo's self-portrait *The Broken Column* (1944) while exemplary of Surrealist virtues is a poignantly autobiographical work. Within a barren desert landscape Kahlo unveils her broken body to reveal an orthopaedic apparatus, nails, and an ionic column holding her broken body. Tears streaming down her face, the work evokes the suffering crucifixion of Jesus Christ on the Cross. The work was produced following orthopaedic surgery and was

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<sup>111</sup>Fuentes, Carlos, "Introduction to the Diary of Frida Kahlo", in *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait*, Bloomsbury, Mexico, 1995, p17.

<sup>112</sup>Chedgzoy, Kate, "Frida Kahlo's 'grotesque' bodies", in (Eds) Florence, Penny and Reynolds, Dee, *Feminist Subjects, multi-media: Cultural Methodologies*, Manchester University Press, New York, 1995, p44.

<sup>113</sup>Baddeley, Oriana and Fraser, Valerie, *Drawing the Line: Art and Cultural Identity in Contemporary Latin America*, Verso, London, 1989, p92, cited by Chedgzoy p42.

<sup>114</sup>Chadwick, Whitney, *Women, Art, and Society*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1990, p294-295.

painted while she was confined to her sick bed. "Here Frida's determined impassivity creates an almost unbearable tension, a feeling of paralysis. Anguish is made visible by nails driven into her naked body. A gap resembling an earthquake fissure splits her torso, the two sides of which are held together by the steel orthopaedic corset that is a symbol of the invalid's imprisonment. The opened body suggests surgery and Frida's feeling that without the steel corset she would literally fall apart."<sup>115</sup> The cracking column replaces her own broken spinal column, it may also refer to the steel rod that pierced her in the bus accident. She stares out at the viewer like a martyred saint, the holy image secularised, and there is no reference to the pre-Colombian except in her mask-like Indian features.

Terry Smith argues in *Making the Modern: Industry Art, and Design in America* that Kahlo did not follow the "orthodox pattern of juvenalia, then apprenticeship/schooling, followed by wide-ranging experimentation, then forming a "mature style"...Rather there is only the "amateur" work and Surrealism."<sup>116</sup> Smith argues that "this "amateur" work is locked into the constraints of domestic, "women's" work- decorative patterning, done for the entertainment and interest of close friends, as a "hobby, an occupation for a lively mind imprisoned within a broken body, the self-amusement of the less talented wife of a famous artist. However fabled she must have been, we must acknowledge the small still voice of the subjugated woman, the cultural drag of the domestic sphere, the constant confining of women's creativity, in her repetition of a limited set of motifs and techniques. In this case, the obverse of sophisticated Surrealist knowingness is a naivete, a literal lack of artistic culture."<sup>117</sup>

While small in size, works such as *The Broken Column* (1944) contradict Smith's view of Kahlo's work. The artistic culture that Kahlo was producing from within may have been influenced by modern European avant garde styles, but her source of visual imagery and visual context was socialist, Indian, and post colonial Mexico. While imprisoned within a disabled body, Kahlo was able to make works, many produced in her studio devoted to the painting, some produced from her convalescent bed, but often commissioned or with the intention of exhibition. Indeed, in 1939 Kahlo travelled to Paris in January for *Mexique*, an exhibition organized by Andre Breton which featured her paintings. The Louvre purchases her self-portrait *The Frame*, suggesting that Kahlo 'fabled' reputation is not entirely the product of revisionist history, but she was, rather acknowledged in her own time as a respected painter. The paintings may articulate a specific feminine vocabulary but they transcend the "decorative patterning, done for entertainment" Smith refers to. Kahlo's works are visually literate within their Latin American context, in addition the works circulate meaningfully within an American and European art context.

The space of femininity explodes out of domesticity and into the street with Kahlo's *The Suicide of Dorothy Hale* (1938-39). While not one of the self-portraits, the picture is a significant work historically, as it was produced with

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<sup>115</sup>Herrera, Hayden, *Frida*, Bloomsbury, London, 1989, p76-77.

<sup>116</sup>Smith, Terry, "Frida Kahlo: Marginality and Modernity", *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1993, p249.

<sup>117</sup>Smith, Terry, "Frida Kahlo: Marginality and Modernity", *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1993, p249.

an audience out of Mexico in mind, namely New York, the United States. The painting offers a sardonic look at urban American culture. She did not compromise her art, although her patron might be horrified with the result. Even in this grim instance of another taking their own life, Kahlo took the opportunity to transmit in her work a sense of her own personal despair. Clare Booth Luce commissioned Kahlo to paint an ex-voto homage to a despairing friend who had committed suicide by throwing herself out of a high-rise building, Hampshire House, in New York, 1939. Disloyal to her American *gringos*, Kahlo produced a vivid picture of the shocking act of suicide, instead of the hoped for image of piety. From out of the Rene Magritte-esque clouds a modern tower rises into the skyline, from which the young North American woman has been shown in sequential stages throwing herself. The beautiful society corpse has been rendered disrespectfully splattered on the pavement with blood trickling from her ear cavities, nose, and mouth, wearing a black 'femme fatale' dress and a corsage of small yellow flowers.<sup>118</sup> As if from the young woman's own blood, Kahlo inscribed in Spanish, "In the city of New York on the 21st of the month of October, 1938, at six in the morning, Mrs Dorothy Hale committed suicide by throwing herself out of a very high window in the Hampshire House building. In her memory, this retablo, having executed it FRIDA KAHLO."

[IMAGE] The same blood dribbles downward, emphasising the gravity of Hale's fall, over the canvas surface and onto the picture frame. In contrast to the gruesome content of this untimely death, there is a dream-like heavenly quality to *The Suicide of Dorothy Hale*, and an angelic perfection and sublimity in the representation of death. Recollections, collected by Kahlo's biographer, reveal the actual event was committed following a glamorous social event and Hale's highly publicised jilting by a high ranking advisor to Roosevelt in the American government. In the painting Kahlo caricatures the death of this society lady into a macabre and darkly humorous spectacle. While erotically charged by the links between unfulfilled desire and death, this work renders the female body in death as abject corpse where the norms of embodied identity are disrupted. "In Kahlo's painting, what eludes language...the representation of the body becomes the material realisation of abjection, enabling the artist to become, not user of words, but of colours and forms capable of embodying the physical and psychic distress which exceeds or negates the expressive capacity of language. The pictorial image of the... abject body thus takes on an ironic carnivalesque beauty, so that the ability of Kahlo's paintings to fascinate the gaze is seen to be generated by the tension between the pain and horror they represent...abjection is a crucial component of the defensive fantasies that shape the body of patriarchal subjectivity. The female body is abjected as Other of this masculine subjectivity, but can never be fully repressed or excluded."<sup>119</sup>

Frida's self-portraits come from a pitiless immersion in the subconscious, perhaps to find answers that daily life could not give her, filled as it was with the odor of medicines and narcotics. In a detailed catalog of surrealism in creative arts, her painting would have to be placed in a most outstanding place in the archive of stern and tragic surrealism, one that for her was like a last resource in a long agony...<sup>120</sup>

Raquel Tibol

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<sup>118</sup>Herrera, Hayden, *Frida*, Bloomsbury, London, 1989, p291.

<sup>119</sup>Chedgzoy, Kate, "Frida Kahlo's 'grotesque' bodies", in (Eds) Florence, Penny and Reynolds, Dee, *Feminist Subjects, multi-media: Cultural Methodologies*, Manchester University Press, New York, 1995, p45.

<sup>120</sup>Tibol, Raquel, *Frida Kahlo: An Open Life*, (trans. Elinor Randall), p127.

It was perhaps the combination of Kahlo's imaging of the unconscious and the humorously macabre that invited Breton to accept her into the Surrealist movement, in which by the late 1930's she was celebrated in exhibitions in New York and Paris. Breton writes of the Mexican lithographer Jose Guadalupe Posada, whose popular engravings of miracle stories, legends, penny dreadfuls, games, love letters, school books, and advertising posters for bull fights, theatre and circus performances had an undoubtable influence upon the Kahlo's art. "The rise of humour in art to a clear, pure form seems to have taken place in a period very close to our own. Its foremost practitioner is the Mexican artist Posada who, in his wonderful popular engravings brings home to us all the conflicts of the 1910 revolution...They tell us something about the passage of comedy from speculation to action and remind us that Mexico, with its superb funereal play-things, is the chosen land of black humour."<sup>121</sup>

*The Diary of Frida Kahlo* can be understood in terms of the Surrealist act of automatic writing, a practise giving form to the repressed feelings and images of the unconscious. This repository of feelings and images could then be viewed as a *sublimation* and *condensation* of repressed psychic energies, analogous to the contents of the unconscious. *Sublimation* refers to the process postulated by Freud to "account for human activities which have no apparent connection with sexuality but which are assumed to be motivated by the force of sexual instinct. The main types of activity described by Freud as sublimated are artistic creation and intellectual inquiry."<sup>122</sup> And where condensation refers to Freud's notion of the essential modes of functioning of the unconscious processes: a sole idea represents several associative chains at whose point of intersection it is located...Condensation can be seen at work in the symptom and, generally speaking, in various formations of the unconscious. But it is in dreams that its action has been most clearly brought out."<sup>123</sup>

In Freudian terms the unconscious (its memories, perceptions, and sensations) occupies a psychical locality with its own system and mechanisms - a succession of inscriptions and signs<sup>124</sup> - the contents of which only become accessible to the conscious domain once resistances have been overcome.<sup>125</sup> By *writing automatically* in her diary, Kahlo finds a way to free elements of her unconscious by free association. This process would inevitably have a marked effect upon the self-portrait paintings Kahlo produced. The automatic writing and images found in *The Diary of Frida Kahlo* are more than cathartic, where the trauma is removed by the revival and expression of the emotion associated with forgotten or repressed ideas of the event that first caused it. The punning, and language games, mockery, and jokes contained within the diary - punctuated by 'caracajadas' (burst of laughter so explosive it can blow away pain) - are like the eccentricity of Kahlo's Tehunana dress, necklaces, rings, intricate head gear, flowery

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<sup>121</sup>Andre Breton quoted in Rothenstein, Julian (Ed and Designed) *Jose Guadalupe Posada: Mexican Popular Prints*, Redstone Press, London, 1993, p15.

<sup>122</sup>Laplanche, J & Pontalis, J.B, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, Hogarth Press, London, 1988, p431.

<sup>123</sup>Laplanche, J & Pontalis, J.B, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, Hogarth Press, London, 1988, p42.

<sup>124</sup>Gosz, Elizabeth, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1990, p82.

<sup>125</sup>Laplanche, J & Pontalis, J.B, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, Hogarth Press, London, 1988, p474.

peasants blouses, "a form of humour too, a great disguise, a theatrical self-fascinated form of auto-eroticism, but also a call to imagine the suffering, naked body underneath and discover its secrets."<sup>126</sup> The automatic writing and images transcend the traumatic event transforming its energies into a work of art. Here actualisation of unconscious wishes can be played out.

Kahlo's diary prefigures the body of self-portraits that she produced. Psychoanalysis would explain these cultural productions as a response to the fateful bus accident, where the event in "the subject's life is defined by its intensity"<sup>127</sup> - the skewering of Kahlo's body in the bus accident - and by the subject's capacity to respond adequately to it. "...and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organisation".<sup>128</sup> The web of meaning and associations running through all fifty five self-portrait works significantly reference this event. There is a clearly defined vocabulary of traumatic experience within the self-portraits, a repository of feelings and images, where unconscious desires and repressed memories gain expression, through distortion and disguise (condensation and displacement). In this way, the single image of Kahlo's skewered body and the bodies subsequent infertility is able to be represented, and the many wishes or thoughts, through compression of common features and elimination of difference, disguise and express the unconscious wish.<sup>129</sup> The repressed energies associated with the event are thus sublimated into creativity, the representation of *self* through the activity of painting.

**Trauma** is a term that has long been associated with medicine and surgery, it is from the Greek...meaning **wound**, which in turn derives from...**to pierce**. It generally means injury where the **skin is broken**...<sup>130</sup>

The traumatic experience - the bus accident- the event producing the actuality of Kahlo's skewered pelvis resonates in the self-portraits. With Surrealist intentions or not, by transforming the energies of the unconscious into self-portrait artworks, Frida Kahlo created a vocabulary with which to articulate a 'self' and 'identity' thus creating an innovative feminine vocabulary.

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<sup>126</sup>Fuentos, Carlos, 'Introduction', in *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait*, Bloomsbury, London, 1995, pp22.

<sup>127</sup>Lapanche, J & Pontalis, J.B, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, Hogarth Press, London, 1988, p465.

<sup>128</sup>Lapanche, J & Pontalis op cit p465

<sup>129</sup>Gosz, Elizabeth, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1990, p87.

<sup>130</sup>Lapanche, J & Pontalis, J.B op cit p465.

## 6. Conclusion

### *An Innovative Feminine Vocabulary*

Who would say that stains live and help one to live ?  
Ink, blood, odour.  
I don't know what ink he would use so eager to leave his mark  
in such a way. I respect his entreaty and I'll do what I can to escape from my world.  
inky worlds - a free land and mine. distant suns  
that call to me because I am part of their nuclei.  
Rubbish. What would I do without the absurd and the ephemeral ? 1953 for many years  
I have understood **dialectical materialism**

The Diary of Frida Kahlo

Kahlo's self-portraits might be understood as a response to the skewering of her body in the tragic bus accident, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organisation".<sup>131</sup>

**...It is a lie that one is aware of the crash, a lie that one cries. In me there were no tears..**<sup>132</sup> Frida

An iconic image in Frida Kahlo's painterly vocabulary, the dead birthing infant in *My Birth* (1932) is both symbolic of the absent figure of Christ and of Frida Kahlo's own feeling of being "assassinated by life". Kahlo indicates the key to her iconography of pain is the image of the suffering Christ, specifically in relation to Kahlo's own identification with Christ's crucifixion - the original Western image of impalement - which is mirrored in the recurring memory of her skewered body in the self-portrait works, a trauma actualising the psychic fear of castration. The crucial image of Christ's crucifixion in her work needs to be located within the broader historically specific socio-cultural context of post-Revolutionary Mexico, where worship of the founding fathers of socialism Engels, Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Mao supplanted an older order. Historicising Kahlo's unconscious expressions in the form of self-portrait paintings reveals an older repressed order that was to inevitably return, a (pre-oedipal) love for the mother - Mexican civilisation - (indigenous Indian ancestry). This is the cultural landscape informing and constraining Kahlo's sense of self as articulated in her self-portraits and in her diary, a repository of repressed images and feelings.

The web of meanings and associations running through all fifty five self portraits to recall the life threatening event of her bus accident. An event that prevented Kahlo from fulfilling her desire to have a child and an event that injured her and caused her pain all her short life. There is a clearly defined vocabulary of feelings and images in her self-portrait paintings, where unconscious desires, memories, dreams, sublime and imagined events find articulation

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<sup>131</sup>Lapanche, J & Pontalis, J.B, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, Hogarth Press, London, 1988, p465.

<sup>132</sup>Herrera op cit p49. [my bold]

in the pictorial space. The single image of Kahlo's skewered pelvis and the bodies subsequent infertility is disguised and distorted in the creative representation of the self through the activity of painting.

Kahlo's impulse towards self-portraiture is inextricably linked to the broader Mexican socialist concern to remake Mexican identity, involving the re-casting of Catholic religious iconography and style, and by providing a non-Western presence in the largely masculine tradition of Western painting in general and self portraiture in particular.



# CHRONOLOGY

*Quoted from The Diary of Frida Kahlo and Martha Zamora's Frida Kahlo*



Frida as a school girl, (1923)

- 1907** Magdalena Carmen Frida Kahlo y Calderon is born July 6 to matilde y Gonzalez, a Catholic mestiza, and Guillermo Kahlo, photographer, a Jew of German-Austro-Hungarian descent, in Coyacoan, then on the outskirts of Mexico City; in later life she celebrated on July 7.
- 1910** The Mexican Revolution breaks out; Kahlo claims she it as the year of her birth.
- 1914** Kahlo contracts polio.
- 1922** The Mexican mural movement begins; the government sponsors murals to be painted in churches, schools, libraries, public buildings. Kahlo commutes to Mexico City to begin classes at the National Preparatory School, a state-run postsecondary school; her program of study is designed with medical school in mind.
- Kahlo makes the acquaintance of Diego Rivera who is painting a mural at her school.
- 1925** Kahlo apprentices with the commercial printer Fernando Fernandez, a friend of her father's. Returning home from school on September 17, Kahlo is in a bus accident: she sustains a broken pelvis bone, spinal column, and other sever injuries. During her convalescence, she begins to paint.
- 1926** Paints Self-Portrait Wearing a Velvet Dress, the first of many self-portraits.
- 1929** On August 21, Kahlo marries Diego Rivera. She is twenty-two years of age, he is forty-three.
- 1930** On November 10 Frida arrives with Rivera in San Francisco.
- 1931** After a breif trip to Mexico, in November Kahlo and Rivera travel to New York for his retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art.
- 1**
- 932** In Detroit for Diego's work on murals at the detroit Institute of Arts, Frida is hospitalised because of severe hemorrhaging (miscarriage).
- Kahlo's mother dies.
- 1933** Kahlo and Rivera return to New York. She paints My dress hangs There (New York) while Rivera paints murals at Rockerfeller Center.
- 1934** Rivera begins and affair with Cristina kahlo, Frida's sister.
- 1935** Kahlo and Rivera separate. Kahlo temporarily takes an apartment in Mexico City, then in July travels to New York. When she returns, the couple reconcile.

- 1937** On January 9, Leon Trotsky and his wife, Natalia Sedova, arrives in Mexico and lives at the Casa Azul.
- 1938** French Surrealist Andre Breton visits Mexico and meets Kahlo's. American collector and film actor Edward G. Robinson purchases four works, her first significant sale.
- 1939** Kahlo travels to Paris in January for *Mexique*, an exhibition organized by Andre Breton which features her paintings. The Louvre purchases her self-portrait *The Frame*.
- 1940** In January *The Two Fridas* and *The Wounded Table* are exhibited in the *International Surrealism Exhibition* organized by the Gallery of Mexican Art.
- Kahlo travels to San Fransisco for further medical treatment. She shows her work in the San Fransisco Golden Gate International Exhibition. The Two Fridas is shown in New York at the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*.
- On December 8 in San Fransisco, Kahlo remarries Diego Rivera.
- 1941** Guillermo Kahlo, Frida's father, dies.
- Kahlo returns home to the family home in Coyoacan to live.
- 1942** Rivera begins building Anahuacalli, his anthropological museum.
- Kahlo's *Self-Portrait with Braid* is included in the exhibition Twentieth-Century Portraits at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- 1943** A Kahlo painting is exhibited in a group show, A Century of the Portrait in Mexico (1830-1942), at the Benjamin Franklin Library, Mexico City. Her work is included in Mexican Art Today at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and is shown in Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century Gallery in New York.
- Kahlo begins teaching at the Ministry of Public Education's School of Painting and Sculpture, La Esmeralda.
- 1946** Kahlo paints The Wounded Deer and Tree of Hope, Stand Fast. She goes to New York for surgery on her spine.
- 1949** Kahlo paints Diego and I and The Love Embrace of the Universe, the earth (Mexico), Me, Diego, and Senor Xolotl, which is exhibited at the inaugural exhibition of the Salon de la Plastica Mexicana.
- 1950** Kahlo is hospitalized for nine months because of recurring spinal problems.
- 1951** Kahlo paints *Self-Portrait of Dr Juan Farill*, several still-lives, and *Portrait of My Father*. In July her right leg is amputated below the knee because of gangrene.
- 1954** Frida is hospitalized in April and May. On July 2, convalescing from bronchial pneumonia, she takes part in a demonstration protesting US intervention in Guatemala. Frida kahlo dies July 13; cause of death is officially reported as "pulmonary embolism" but suicide is suspected.
- 1955** Rivera puts Kahlo's Coyoacan home in trust as public art museum.

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