

Frida kahlo: works and life



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Introduction of the essay

This essay will focus on the work of Frida Kahlo, a Mexican female artist. This analysis aims to reveal the personal characteristics of the artist, by examining Kahlo's choice of subject matter and investigating what drives her to create art that is so bold and defiant. To further the analysis it will look into to the issues her art attempts to raise and the message her work portrays. It will focus on how her paintings were greatly influenced by her life paying particular attention to the theme of femininity and sexuality that run throughout her work. Henry Ford Hospital (1932), . Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair (1940),. My Birth (1932),. The Two Frida's (1939),. Flower of life (1944),. Two Nudes in the Jungle (1939). Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Humminbird (1940. However it will not be limited to only these, it will also include a few other pieces of Kahlo's work that may be important to explain the theme of sexuality and femininity. It will aim to search for a better understanding of the artists work and the thought process that may have gone into producing these particular pieces of work. It will look at the artist's subject matter and discuss what the materials of those subjects may be trying to represent. It will also look at the work of female artist Tracey Emin, to distinguish the similarities and differences in her portrayal of femininity and sexuality today. Ultimately it will be asking the question if Frida kahlo's work still portray women of today and can women still relate to her work.

Introduction of Frida Kahlo

Magdalena Carmen Frieda Kahlo Calderon was born on 6 July 1907 in Coyoacan, Mexico. She was born to a Mexican woman Matilde Calderon and German born father Guillermo Kahlo who had a business as a photographer.

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The family lived relatively well in the blue house that her father built considering the financial troubles caused by the revolution. Along with her parents she lived with two older sisters and two half sisters from her father's first marriage and Her younger sister Christina. Frida faced a tough childhood and at the tender age of six she was stricken with polio which meant she was forced to stay in bed for nine months. Even after her recovery Frida was left with a smaller right leg which caused her to limp as she walked, and her classmates nicknamed her 'Frida, peg leg'. This deformity led her to always feel self-conscious. Frida wanted to study medicine and so In 1922 at the age of fifteen Frida enrolled in a premedical program at the National Preparatory School of the University of Mexico. This was considered a prestigious institution and out of 2000 students' Frida was only one of thirty-five girls who were accepted. At the school Frida mixed with like minded people and became part of a rebellious group of students known as the cachuchas. Within this group they all shared this time to enjoy the renewal of Mexico following the revolution of 1910-20. Through their strong bond of friendship they gained an instinct for rebellion against the authority. These ideas and values which were bought into her, would not only prepare her for the future, but would remain with her all her life. While at preparatory school in her spare time she took drawing lessons and here is where she came into contact with the Mexican painter Diego Rivera, who later plays a big part in Frida's life. Until recently the Preparatoria University was restricted solely to males, and Frida being one of only a few female students, began to grow self-assurance and confidence about herself. She continued to study very hard in the hopes of one day continuing to medical school and becoming a female doctor despite the social climate at the time, of which being a female

doctor was a rarity. Although the studies in biology and physiology didn't give Frida a medical profession they did later play a big part in her paintings where Frida made use of medical analogies and metaphors often painting literal organs and medical instruments . Henry Ford Hospital (1932). The Two Frida's (1939).

On September of 1925, Frida suffered a near fatal accident that changed Frida's life dramatically. Frida was on bus back to home when it smashed into a trolley car. Frida was caught in the impact and was left with very serious injuries. She had crushed her right foot causing it to break in 11 places. A metal handrail pierced Frida through the pelvis which she described ironically as losing her virginity. Her spinal column, collarbone, ribs, and pelvis were broken. Although she recovered from these critical injuries the accident left Frida physically very fragile but more damaging was that it left her with deep psychic consequences. Frida had to come to terms with the fact that she will be semi-invalid for the rest of her life and that any professional plans she had would have to be discarded. The time Frida spent in the hospital was a very lonely one, so she turned to books of poetry and philosophy to escape this solitude. (The poetry is evident in the diary of Frida Kahlo). It was only when she returned home that she started her first painting, which was a self portrait. She was bed-ridden and encased in a body cast and next to her lay a small mirror and paint which her father gave to her. The mirror constantly forced Frida to confront her own identity and to question the very essence of art and this is why her paintings were more than just self portraits, 'they were much more than autobiography, her self-portraits would prove to be images of the inner self, of a being setting out on

a quest, as existential as it was aesthetic, of a young woman still in the process of formation, of an awakening conscience.'(Christina Burrus 2005: 201)

After being freed from her plaster Frida became a member of the Mexican communist party in 1928, also at this time as her body was slowly healing Frida embraced her new skills of painting and started seeing herself as a serious artist. Soon after Frida set out to gain a career being an artist and for this she went to Diego Rivera for advice. Frida greatly admired Diego and this fascination grew to a romantic relationship and which lead to Frida marrying Diego in Mexico City hall on august 1929. This part of Frida's life was very much all about getting back to her Mexican roots and going against the political current, she displayed this by wearing the traditional Tehuana costume. From this day till her death Frida dressed in this ornate costume that was accustomed to authentic Mexico. She did this not only to rebel against the social norms of politics but it allowed her to construct her image and established her personal style which would make her easily recognizable and unique.

In 1930 Frida faced yet another tragedy to her already tough life; her first pregnancy was terminated due to medical complications. To come to terms with her loss she persisted on painting and eventually her work was recognized and exhibited for the first time in San Francisco. But soon after her short success came another tragedy, in early 1932 Frida faced a second miscarriage at the Henry Ford hospital. In the same year she hears news that her mother is dying. This left an already fragile Frida depressed, emotionally scarred and questioning life altogether. This time was very testing on Frida's

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marriage, it became strained and they both searched outside their marriage for sexual pleasures and emotional help. During this time of a troubled marriage Frida engaged in sexual relations with both male and female. Even though Rivera's affairs may have bothered Frida it wasn't until he became romantically involved with Frida's younger sister Cristina that she decided to leave Rivera. After this time she was involved in a couple of relationships with other men but this never really satisfied Frida as the burden of not being able to bear a child was always present. And it was at this time that she acquired a sense of complexity and assertiveness in her work, in *My Nurse and I* (1937). Frida's recurring health problems meant she had to be hospitalized for appendicitis which leads to several toes being removed after a foot surgery. Even with her health problems in 1938 Frida was labeled a surrealist artist by Andre Breton after her first solo exhibition in New York. At the end of 1939 Frida and Rivera divorced and as a result she painted *The Two Frida's* (1939). *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940). At this time of anguish and separation she also painted more self portraits but now she adorned herself by animals, vegetation and various other subjects carrying particular meanings with them to create her dreams and desires within the paintings. Frida further damaged her body by turning to drugs and intoxication on a daily basis to suppress the loss she felt of Rivera not being in her life. After eighteen months of separation Frida and Rivera reunited and eventually remarried. Their new relationship had respective territories and Frida started to mother Rivera despite the pain she felt from her deteriorating health and the loss of her father in 1941. The following years Frida experienced a lot success as her work was shown in various galleries throughout the world and she begins teaching art and sculpture in schools.

By 1946 Frida's ever weakening health got worse which meant she could no longer remain seated or standing and after various different body corsets she undergoes a bone graft operation on her spine. This operation proved unsuccessful however she spent many more months in hospital painting. As her terminal weakness declined further she became unable to paint and on 13 July 1954 Frida Kahlo died at her home. Her last words in her diary read: 'I hope the leaving is joyful- and I hope never to return' (Frida Kahlo in Herrera 1983: 392).

Main body of text

Frida Kahlo, a well renowned artist not simply for her paintings but for her extraordinary life that she lived. Kahlo says " I painted my own reality" (cited in Betty Ann Brown 'autobiographical imagery in the art of Los Angeles Women'(march 1989) yesterday and tomorrow: California women, New york midmarch arts press p. 119) by this she is signifying not only that she relied on biography but that she created herself in her paintings. Kahlo's work which is manifestly autobiographical and touches on these outstanding aspects of her life-overcoming physical handicaps and constant pain, living through her husband's infidelities and a morbid obsession with her inability to bear a child. These issues vividly run throughout her work and especially in the piece. Henry Ford Hospital (1932). This is a shocking and disturbing painting which makes the viewer simultaneously repulsed by it and drawn to it. Kahlo is the central point of the painting her face is of great despair and anguish lying stark naked on a bed of blood from her month-long ordeal of miscarriage.

The six surrounding images, connected to her lower abdomen by umbilical cord-looking red lines are specific to her miscarriage. The dead foetus is Diegutio (little Diego") who will not exist, to his right Kahlo paints a snail which may have been used to represent the slow horror of losing a baby or possibly embodies her state at that point: an empty, hollow shell, both physically and emotionally. To his left is a diagram of the female anatomy, the system that has failed Kahlo. This system from which all life springs is eternally riddled by pain and complications but also largely holds female power. When it does not work correctly, a woman may feel that her sole claim to power in a male-dominated world has been ripped out of her. The surgical machine was invented by Kahlo most probably to explain the operation procedure but the function of it is unknown. Kahlo had a certain dislike to machines and this dislike came from the fact that inevitably it was a machine that caused her injury in 1925. This dislike is made very clear in her self portrait on the Border Between Mexico and the United states 1932 where " she contrasts the diverse fruit of Mexico's earth and history with the mechanical reproduction of homogenous automatons and proliferation of monolithic, uniform skyscrapers." (Sarah M. lowe 1991: 67. I feel the machine has a deeper significance it represents the force of the male society (since most medical doctors are still men and the profession has a strong masculine stereotype about it) taking what it can from women and leaving them to " bleed" after they have failed or served their purpose. It is not women that are intrinsically important to men, but it is what they can do for a man that gives them what little status that they do have. The withering orchid, eternally a feminine symbol which lies at the bottom centre of the painting is a flower which was given by Diego her husband. According to

Kahlo this was to merge a sexual metaphor with the sentimental. Diagonally across, on the lower right hand side is reproduction of her own pelvis which was broken by the accident and damaged further through sexual intercourse. It's the main cause of Kahlo's despair and the blame for Kahlo not being able to bear a child to term. It is worth mentioning that the bed is apparently floating in front of a vast plain ground and is separate from the industrialized city in the background. This creates an impression of loneliness and helplessness and showing her isolation may be representing her isolated state of mind. She is in an entirely unfamiliar space both literally and figuratively. Kahlo failed at creating life, which isolates her from the male population by making her less desirable and taking away her "usefulness". Furthermore, she has lost the power that other women share, thereby isolating her from other women. She sees herself as a failure: an outcast that does not belong anywhere in society. And underneath the bleak sky in "no mans-land" she is alone with her grief and misery. The elimination of clothes on her body is not for the male gaze but for a medical gaze. And by controlling this she stays clear of being the object of desire which is traditionally associated with the naked female body. The story that this piece tells is one that lies at the heart of being female. While women have come very far since this piece was painted (in the early twentieth century), there is still a feeling that certain things are strictly female, and many women fight to hold on to those precious elements and to keep them as sacred as womanly possible. The ability to become pregnant and give birth is one such precious feat. This is very evident in kahlo's other works where she's used images of germination, of birth, of nurturing, and even of Rivera cradled in her arms to express a lifelong anguish at barrenness. This desperation is easily

understandable due to the fact Kahlo was Mexican and living under the Mexican social codes, which meant motherhood and having a child was a crucial part of life and it almost defined womanhood. Without suffrage, women in Mexico had no officially sanctioned political life and were consequently limited to a domestic role. There was a strict separation between the genders in society both publicly and privately, which makes Kahlo's work all the more radical as she steps outside the comfort zone of what was expected from a woman. What is especially touching about this piece is that it transcends racial and ethnic boundaries, instead striking a chord in the hearts of all women. Fears of pregnancy, childbirth and the complications and emotional and physical trauma that go along with these things are on practically every woman's mind at some point in her life. Even women who decide that they do not want to have children must, at some point, think about pregnancy in order to decide why they would prefer to avoid it. While pregnancy is certainly not the central experience or defining characteristic for being female, it is still one thing that females only can experience, it is inherently a female act. This makes it relevant, in some manner, to all females.

Self-portrait with Cropped Hair 1940, Here Kahlo explores the social construct of a "woman". With this painting she is challenging and interpreting the cultural definition of femininity. This self portrait Kahlo eliminates all the social norms of being a woman in society. She does this by cropping all her hair which is one of the defining elements of a female, loses the Mexican dresses for which many of her paintings hold and losing the modest posture instead taking a stern stance. Transgression is seemed

even till this day a very daring act even though cross dressing dates back to biblical scripture (Deuteronomy 22: 5). The way a person dresses places them in different social classes and enables people to differentiate the gender split. Even though we are in the 21st century there's certain garments that a male generally wouldn't wear such as skirts, dresses, corsets and tights etc and vice versa, in order to stay with social norms and be easily accepted. So here in this painting Kahlo is being very bold by dressing herself in an oversized man's suit and holding a pair of scissors where normally a fan would be seen. Kahlo's gaze is stern and straight towards the viewer engaging them and almost forcing them to see her as a female. She holds a lot of power in this painting and she does this simply by her confidence in her stance she purposefully has her legs spread apart to resemble confident masculine qualities. By placing her-self in this type of dressing and manipulating her body in this way she is ultimately declaring her independence. And even after the act of cutting the hair is done she still holds on to the scissors implying that she is deliberately making the viewer aware that she physically did this to symbolise her cutting away parts of her femininity. However not all is lost she still keeps her earrings and her high heeled shoes to leave somewhat of an indication that she is still a female even after this transformation, as if not to let go completely of what she really is. Her face gives little away about her emotions or feelings yet she boldly renders herself in such shocking paintings of herself. She does this intentionally to give a sense of ambiguity. " The lines from a popular song painted above the figure of Kahlo point out how women's status relies upon elements of social signification (clothing, conduct, physical beauty), and how resistance to prescribed modes of behaviour is rewarded with, in this case

emotional disenfranchisement". (Sarah M. Lowe 1991: 59) It reads look, if I loved you it was for your hair, now that you're bald I no longer love you. The hair which splattered across with no control all over the floor around her is demanding attention and representing the freedom she feels.

The two Fridas 1939 was painted shortly after her divorce to Rivera and possibly painted to try to come to terms with the separation. In this image Kahlo is not analysing her self but more constructing different forms of her and her personalities. She has placed both forms of herself seated on a bench on a backdrop of a cloudy sky, keeping it a very vague and un-detailed space. The Frida on the left who is wearing the Tehuana dress represents the one loved by Rivera, and the one on the right who is wearing a white Victorian garment represents the one despised by Rivera. Both Frida's chests are exposed to reveal one of the body's main organs: the heart. This is a direct demonstration of Frida's anguish over unrequited love. The heart is symbolic of ones love to another but more importantly in Kahlo's Aztec heritage it symbolises ritual sacrifice, so Kahlo may be trying to represent what she has sacrificed for Rivera's love. The Frida on the right is holding a small portrait of her husband as a child. The artery which emerges from it is very reminiscent of an umbilical cord which suggests Frida saw Rivera as her lover and as her child. The artery is linked to the heart which supplies both women with blood. In her heart the artery splits and leads to the rejected Frida where it splits for second time. The artery is open and the Frida on the right is depicted holding surgical clamps to stop the bleeding. However the clamp seems to be failing to do its job and the blood is dripping on to her dress and eventually Frida will bleed to death. This blood could be

a reminder of the many surgeries, miscarriages and abortions Kahlo underwent.

Blood is what nourishes a human being and it essential for us to stay healthy, so by Frida depicting herself bleeding to death allows us to understand her state of mind, drained and lifeless. Bleeding to death is also a slow and painful death and Frida may have this to make the viewer understand the slow deep agony of loosing a husband. Both women are separated by generation which is depicted by Kahlo in their dresses yet they both seem to be allied and she portrays this by both Frida's holding hands and supplying life to each other. In this painting Frida conceives herself as an emotionally damaged woman who is bleeding to death. This is a woman after a divorce and she is spilling her feelings on to this painting and no one does it better than Kahlo as Rivera quotes 'in the annals of art, Frida is the only person ever to have ripped open her breast and torn out her heart to tell the truth in biological terms and say what is felt inside' (Isabel Alcantara and Sandra Egnolff 1999: 69). This painting raises issues of broken relationships and how they can affect a woman emotionally and physically. This account from Frida is from a marital relationship and tells the story of Frida's pain after she hears about his husband's infidelity with her younger sister Christina. So not only did Frida have to face the betrayal from her husband but also from her own flesh and blood. This is why this painting can reach out to any women who have gone through facing betrayal and having to come to terms with the loss of a relationship.

To gain a broader understanding of the portrayal of sexuality and femininity in art I want to look at the work of Tracey Emin and see the similarities and

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differences between the artists. She just like Frida raises the issues of sexuality and femininity through art in an autobiographical way. A living and working British artist Emin differs not only in generation to Frida but also in culture.

Tracey Emin, a fine art, artist, has a celebrity status and is well known as a "young British artist" (YBA's). She is notorious to the general public due to her outspoken work, as Her autobiographical style of work is very much about exposing things about herself that people generally would be too ashamed to reveal. Tracey Emin's work is very subjective as her ideas are drawn from her personal life and emotions through particular situations in life. Her work appears in a confessional manner, due to its vagueness the viewer is made to question what the work is trying to achieve. This leaves a big gap for criticism and interpretation which I think is what makes her, and her work so high profiled within the art industry. One of her best known work titled 'my bed' 1998 confirms this notion. The installation was Emin's own bed compiled with dirty sheets, bloodied underwear, empty alcohol bottles, used condoms, cigarette butts and other items alongside it. The installation was shown in the Tate gallery in London as a Turner Prize nominee in 1999. It was a display of the post nervous breakdown Emin had gone through and it instantly put her mental state and her sexual life in the public eye.

Consequently this work caused a debate within the media. Prior to this it made its first appearance in Tokyo following on to New York. This work speaks out very boldly and feels very honest as it is a personal object, her bed, on display. This shows the artist is brave and courageous as she is willing to put her personal life to public scrutiny to get her message across.

This is further highlighted by the survey carried out by The Independent on Sunday (24. 10. 1999), which asked its readers, " would you show your bed to the public?" the question was taken literally and majority of the people stated that they would not want their bed displayed and some went to say " worst nightmare would be putting my bed on display". This just highlights how intimate this piece of artwork was. I think it was very successful because " it was an environment where public and private realms intertwined" (Sarah Kent 1998: 35) and through this it gave the audience a feeling they had a direct insight into her life almost giving a sense of being accepted into a secret. This particular piece of work was very controversial and many people found this very hard to accept as art. This was because of the subject matter and because it was her own bed, in its raw state and not a constructed piece of artwork. People started to question if art could be displayed in this manner as in the (the observer 24. 10. 1999) Matthew Collings asked, if anyone's bed could be a work of art. He concluded that it was only possible because of her celebrity status and that " there's a little culture of Tracey Emin that she's worked on over the years, and this is what makes it possible for her bed to make the leap from lifestyle into art".

In retrospect this criticism may not have been deserved, as Emin's bed was made as she was living through the trauma and this gave it a lot more authenticity than the usual approach artists use of making something to represent a certain feeling. This work can be viewed as a successful piece of work as it was not produced in the knowledge or expectation of it being an art installation. This work creates a powerful image as it exhibits the 20th century women's sexual life on public display. Due to the subject matter, the

work conveys a powerful emotive reaction from the audience. The instillation feels very real provoking an emotional response, this maybe a result of the un-staged like quality. This work is successful in not only provoking an emotional response from the viewer but it also captures the change in society and time, where women can openly show their sexuality in a raw manner.