Frida Kahlo’s Autobiography: A Life in Painting

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Frida Kahlo began painting in 1925 after a bus accident left her bedridden for several months, and a semi-invalid for the remainder of her life. Throughout her short life she experienced immense physical and emotional pain, not only because of the accident but also because of what she often referred to as her second ‘accident’—her husband Diego Rivera.¹ Kahlo was a fierce nationalist, and felt a strong connection with her Mexican heritage. Her political beliefs, cultural heritage and suffering feature throughout her artworks. Critics have come to believe that Kahlo sought to externalise and distance her pain through her art. When engaging with Kahlo’s work it becomes obvious to onlookers that they were experiencing her painted autobiography. Pieces such as Self-Portrait (1948), Henry Ford Hospital (1932), My Dress Hangs Here (1933), and The Two Fridas (1939) are all significant works that commemorate events and emotions felt by Kahlo, and represent the autobiographical nature of her work.

Frida Kahlo had not intended to become an artist. As a child she had dreamt of becoming a doctor. However in 1925, as the result of the horrific bus accident, Kahlo’s spinal column was broken in three places along with her collarbone, two ribs, right leg and foot. Her pelvis was fractured and her left shoulder dislocated. A steel rod pierced her hip and exited through her vagina, complicating her future attempts to have children. As a result of the accident, Kahlo was encased in a plaster cast, which confined her to bed for several months.² The boredom of her restriction was the catalyst for her art. Her mother had a special easel built to fit around her bed, which allowed her to paint lying down. She began painting the only subjects available to her in her confinement: her friends, family and herself.

While Kahlo began painting to combat boredom, it soon became an outlet she relied on to enable her to express her beliefs and feelings. She explained: ‘I paint my own reality. The only thing that I know is that I paint because I need to, and I paint whatever passes through my head without any other consideration’.³ Kahlo explained that her paintings

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were predominantly self-portraits because she was so often alone, and in addition was quoted as having said, ‘I am the person I know best’. Her self-portraits alone can be considered autobiographical as they often formed an alternate self that shared and reflected her feelings. Throughout the series of portraits her gaze remains steady, staring out to the viewer, imploring us to engage and understand her. She depicts herself upright and strong, as if they were painted to confirm her tenuous hold on life. According to Rupert Gracia, Kahlo’s paintings, particularly her self-portraits were ‘clever and skilful depictions that simultaneously mask and reveal her unbearable pain of the body and spirit’. He believed that many of her paintings vividly represent her personal crises.

This is particularly true for Self-portrait, 1948 (figure 1), in which she is wearing a Tehuana headdress. Kahlo began developing her authentically Mexican style in the first years of her marriage to reflect several values that were important to her; however she also wore traditional costume to please her husband. The headdress can be seen as a plea for Rivera’s love, but she appears too overdressed; the finery is a mask. The lace is jagged, stiff and closed in, making her appear trapped in the space. According to Herrera, the greater Kahlo’s pain, whether emotional or physical, the more desperately festive her adornments became. The three tears staining her cheek could represent the years of pain caused by her longing for Rivera’s love, particularly on the occasions he strayed. Relying on her mirror for comfort and

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4 Herrera, above n 2, 3.
9 Herrera, above n 2, 170.
10 Ibid.
companionship of her alternate self, Kahlo became a voyeur of her own grief, painting the griever and the observer.\textsuperscript{11}

Kahlo’s inability to have children was perhaps the most distressing of her personal crises and was therefore depicted in several of her works, along with the obverse theme of fertility. *Henry Ford Hospital* of 1932 (figure 2) effectively depicts a significant event in the artist’s life, and conveys the emotional turmoil Kahlo experienced during the ordeal. Kahlo’s deformed pelvis allowed conception, however prevented her from bringing a child to term. She underwent several abortions and miscarriages, the most traumatic of which occurred in 1932 when the artist was living in Detroit whilst Rivera was working on a commission. After three and a half months of pregnancy, Kahlo haemorrhaged and was rushed to Henry Ford Hospital.\textsuperscript{12}

In the painting, Kahlo lies naked on a hospital bed, bleeding onto a sheet. A tear runs down her cheek and her stomach still bulges from the failed pregnancy. Six red ribbons are held to her stomach, suggesting they are umbilical cords. At the end of each floats an object symbolic of her emotions at the time of the miscarriage. In the centre is a male foetus; representing the young boy she had hoped for. Kahlo based this image on medical illustrations procured by Rivera whilst she was still in hospital, as she wanted to accurately depict what she had lost.\textsuperscript{13} Next to

\textsuperscript{11} Herrera, above n 2, 171.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, 68.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 72.
the foetus is a pink female abdomen, which Kahlo explained was her ‘idea of explaining the insides of a woman’. The snail is said to have referred to the slowness of the miscarriage and the orchid is reminiscent of an extracted uterus. According to Herrera, the machine is an autoclave, a device for sterilising surgical instruments. This was invented ‘to explain the mechanical part of the whole business’. Kahlo was not impressed by modern industry and felt that machines represented ‘bad luck and pain’. The remaining object appears to be a backbone and pelvis, her damaged back and pelvis the principal cause for her inability to give birth.

Kahlo and the bed seem to float within a void, disconnected from the rest of the world. On the distant horizon is the Rouge River Complex, where Rivera was busy preparing his murals. The faraway buildings ‘evoke the patient’s perception of the outer world’s indifference to her plight, her feeling of separation from everyday life’. Disjunctions in scale and the way the bed is tipped up in intentionally incorrect perspective add to the impression of disconnection and helplessness.

*The Broken Column* of 1944 (figure 3) is another piece by Kahlo depicting her immense pain. However, in this case her back, and the brace she was forced to wear after surgery cause the pain. In this painting Kahlo is again depicted in a bleak, dream-like landscape, representing an externalised expression of her inner desolation. The personal subject matter and obvious pain and discomfort felt by Kahlo in both pieces highlights the autobiographical nature of her work.

14 Herrera, above n 2, 73.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Herrera, above n 5, 145.
18 Herrera, above n 2, 70.
19 Herrera, above n 5, 75.
While Kahlo often used her painting to externalise both her physical and emotional pain, she also depicted her political alliances and her Mexican heritage. According to Garcia: ‘painting and socio-political engagement were both of great importance for Kahlo. Since a youth she was continuously politically conscious and involved, at various levels, in leftist issues.’ Kahlo’s distaste for capitalism is highlighted in *My Dress Hangs There* of 1933 (figure 4) in which she depicts a leftist view of Manhattan, the centre of capitalism.

![Figure 4. *My Dress Hangs There*, 1933. Oil and collage on masonite, 18” x 19.75”.

In the top centre of the painting stands Federal Hall, Kahlo’s symbol of capitalism. The building is linked to a Gothic church via a red ribbon, suggestive of a vital vein or artery. In the window of the church a red ‘S’ transforms the crucifix in to a dollar sign. Alongside the church is another representation of false values—a billboard of Mae West, who conjures up connotations of vanity and luxury. To the artist her appeal is ephemeral; the edges of the billboard are peeling and the buildings below her are burning.

The steps of Federal Hall are presided over by a statue of George Washington, a representative of the idealism of the past. Instead of a set of marble stairs Kahlo has pasted a graph showing ‘Weekly Sales in

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20 Garcia, above n 7, 14.
21 Herrera, above n 5, 175.
Millions’, which is juxtaposed with a collage effect at the bottom of the canvas. Pictures of military parades and political protesters form the masses, and embody those who are working for, but not benefiting from the economy. Kahlo mocks the North American preoccupation with efficient plumbing and sport by placing a toilet and sports trophy on giant pedestals made from classical columns in the foreground. It is the blue cord held up by the two objects from which Kahlo’s Mexican Tehuana costume hangs. By hanging her dress empty, Kahlo is making the statement that whilst she may reside in the United States, her heart is not in it; she wants nothing to do with the capitalist ‘Gringolandia’.22 The colourful and festive costume is contrasted on all sides by endless bleak, blank and anonymous office blocks and skyscrapers. One of the buildings forms a perch for an oversized telephone, the cord of which links the other blank buildings, highlighting the impersonal nature of the capitalist society. In the foreground, a bin is full of empty bottles, entrails, bones and a human hand—a comment on the ‘human waste and wasted human beings in a capitalist society’.23 In the background stands the Statue of Liberty, a satirical reminder of what the United States was meant to stand for.24

In 1939 Kahlo and Rivera were divorced. In a letter to friend Nickolas Muray, Kahlo wrote; ‘I feel so rotten and lonely that it seems to me that nobody in the world has suffer [sic] the way I do’.25 Kahlo began painting vigorously during the divorce period to express her inner pain. According to Garcia, Kahlo’s ‘apparent obsession with and bitter delight in pain and dejection seen in The Two Fridas (figure 5) was possibly her skilful way of symbolically confronting and freeing herself of these tribulations’.26 Kahlo admitted to a close friend that The Two Fridas recorded her unhappiness at being separated from Rivera.27 In the painting the two Fridas sit side-by-side clasping hands. On the left, Frida is depicted wearing European clothing; the Frida Rivera did not love, whilst on the right she is adorned in a Tehuana skirt and blouse, representing the Frida Rivera did love. Each suggests Kahlo’s dual heritage; part German and part Indian. Both hearts are exposed using the same literal device to show her pain in love as used in other works such as Memory (1937). However, the heart of the loved Frida is whole, whereas the lace bodice of the other is torn to reveal a broken heart. The stronger, Tehuana Frida is holding a miniature picture of Diego Rivera as a boy, which represents her lost husband. Exiting from its frame is a red vein that loops around her arm, through her heart and connects

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22 Herrera, above n 5, 174.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid, 175.
25 Herrera, above n 2, 134.
26 Garcia, above n 7, 5.
27 Herrera, above n 2, 135.
across to the other Frida’s heart and eventually the unloved Frida attempts to stem the flow of blood with a pair surgical pincers. The flow cannot be stopped however, and the blood spills onto her skirt. Some of the flowers on the hem of the skirt have been replaced by splatters of blood. The red blood contrasted on the white skirt is reminiscent of the *Henry Ford Hospital* scene and evokes memories of miscarriage and countless surgeries.

Both faces remain calm and impassive, both a testament to Kahlo’s strength, and a poised depiction that would serve to comfort Kahlo through the period of turmoil. The defiant Fridas are set against a turbulent sky, rent with dark and menacing clouds, which are representative of their inner turmoil. As in *Henry Ford Hospital*, the figures are disconnected from the vast space in which they are depicted, rendering *The Two Fridas* a dramatisation of Kahlo’s loneliness. Kahlo’s only companion is herself; the doubling of herself serves to further emphasise her aloneness.

In conclusion, Frida Kahlo’s art is autobiographical in nature. She painted to express and externalise her inner pain, in a way that would allow her to distance herself from it. Her pain is evident in many of her works, in particular, *Henry Ford Hospital*, *The Broken Column* and several
of her self-portraits. Not only does Kahlo depict her pain, but she expresses her political beliefs and the strong connection she felt with her Mexican heritage, as seen in *My Dress Hangs There* among others. It is the way in which Kahlo openly conveys her personal messages and feelings that renders her work autobiographical. By studying her paintings one can experience Frida Kahlo’s life, her trials and tribulations, as well as her values, and beliefs.
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