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Frida Kahlo Once Again¹

Teresa del Conde*

On July 13, 1954, Frida Kahlo reached that perfect state of equilibrium in which opposites meet and nothing new or irregular can disturb the eternal embrace of the earth. A few months before, on February 4, she transcribed in her diary the thought of a Marxist theorist, “Changes and struggles disconcert us; they terrify us because they are permanent and unrelenting. We seek calm and peace anticipating the death we die each second.... We shelter ourselves, we tie ourselves to irrationality, magic, abnormality, for fear of the extraordinary beauty of certainty.” This woman who, perhaps as no other, personifies the love of life based on the recognition in herself of a death compulsion, had already learned many years before to sublimate her frustrations not only in her painting but also in the artistry that she gave her very existence and the formidable projection of her personality, which Diego Rivera described as “like the two faces of Janus, as adorable as a beautiful smile and as profound and cruel as the bitterness of life.”²

Frida’s slow suicide, marked by alternating self-destructive explosions and displays of a will to live so intense that

sometimes it was furious, began years before and took the form of a painful pilgrimage, colored with ritual, to doctors’ offices, medical centers and hospitals. It reached its height in August 1953 when her doctors, Dr. Luis Méndez and Juan O’Farrill, decided to amputate her gangrenous right leg. An entire study could be written exclusively based on the stories and medical reports and Frida’s relationships with her doctors. It would not begin in 1925 when she had her terrible accident, but in 1913 when she was stricken with polio, or even before.

In her early maturity, Frida—in her own words, “murdered by life”—had an unimaginable sense of humor and a compulsion for authenticity comparable only to her will to live. Those who knew her said, “She needed the exaltation woven into love, joy and truth. She decorated the truth, invented it, took it apart, extracted it, provoked it; but she never distorted it.”³ These words describe succinctly not only a trait of Frida’s personality, but also a fundamental aspect of the way she approached the themes in her painting. Everyone knows that a good part of her work is made up of self-portraits, self-portraits that not only reflect a mirror image, objectifying and simultaneously separating reality from the other parallel reality on the canvas. There is much more. It is not just simple repetition. We know that the compulsion

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¹ A first version of this essay was published by Mexico City’s National Art Museum under the title “Frida, The Great Concealer,” in the catalogue for the 1981 Frida Kahlo-Tina Modotti exhibit.

² Bertram D. Wolfe, *Diego Rivera, su vida, su obra y su época*, Ercilla, Santiago de Chile, 1941, p. 412.

³ Raquel Tibol, *Frida Kahlo. Crónica, testimonios y aproximaciones*, Ediciones de Cultura Popular, Mexico City, 1977, p. 19.

to repeat is a sort of uncontrollable force that commonly reflects the non-use of past experience, not reliving it in the here and now in order to always present it as new.

And there is something else: though Frida is openly the center of her work, she lived basically turned into herself; she did not consider what she made with her hands part of herself. That is why she gave away many of her paintings. Her person grew with all its products and powers, but at the same time transcended her primary narcissism because even pain and love, with all their danger and hostility, become a dual demand. On the one hand, her obvious sadomasochism was oriented to self-preservation, and, on the other, she tried to project herself to others with a clear sense of respect and veneration of everything living: revolutionary ideas, the people she knew, the causes she believed in and, of course, animals, plants, the earth—in a word, everything susceptible to being transformed.

Little has been said about her beliefs. I think they were based on a syncretism in which the love of her fellows had its deserved place (although not exactly in the Christian sense), side by side with the principle of the renovation of matter, or perhaps better said, with the strength emanating from everything alive and even inanimate objects.

This kind of belief assumes that besides the organs of the senses, there is a seeing organ that is not the eyes. This idea, symbolized by the third eye present in many of Frida's most important paintings allows abstractly for the realization of truth and unity with reality, a unity achieved through a series of embraces that are a metaphor for the interrelation of everything in the universe. A 1949 painting illustrates this point, even in the title, *The Loving Embrace of the Universe, the Earth, Diego, Myself and the Lord Xólotl*.

In another painting, *Sun and Life* (1947), the main concept is a face with the third eye drawn as the center of concentric circles. This "plant," not quite a sunflower, is surrounded by bulbous vegetables shaped like germinating seeds. The two



Portrait of Luther Burbank, 1931 (oil on Masonite).

open rudimentary leaves of the seed plant are the shape of uteruses and reveal the organs within: they have both the feminine and masculine principles, undifferentiated by gender but to a certain extent reversing functions. So, what look like Fallopian tubes are at the same time pistils spouting semen, and the uteruses themselves function as sort of phal-luses. A small embryo is developing at exactly the same level as the third eye, an allusion perhaps to nature's own quality as a "seer."

Moses (1945) is, perhaps, of all of Frida's work, the painting which best represents this aspect of her iconography. He appears as a child of the sun in the act of being born at the center of a symmetrical composition

depicting representatives of all humanity throughout the ages. The origin of life and the transformation of energy into matter are this painting's predominant concepts.

This kind of pantheism with evolutionary highlights has its mystical aspects, rooted in ancient Asian doctrines. Frida probably came into contact with these currents of thought from her early youth and increased her interest in them through some of her high school friends, the group called *los cachuchas* (so called because they wore caps). In a photograph taken by her father on February 7, 1926, she is seated, dressed in a loose, dark silk robe, adorned only with a double Asian insignia on her breast. In her right hand she is holding a half-open book identified only by an astrological sign. In her student days, she used a symbol to sign her name: an isosceles triangle sometimes drawn with the vertex pointed downward and other times pointed up, depending on her mood.⁴

⁴ Manuel González Ramírez, a friend of Frida's from high school until the eve of her death, told this story to her biographer, Hayden Herrera. Unfortunately, González did not elaborate on the origins of the signature's symbolism. Herrera does not touch on the possible relationship between iconography and Frida's writings and occultism in his excellent and very complete book, *Frida. A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, Harper & Row, New York, 1983.



Photo courtesy of Modern Art Museum

The Two Fridas, 1939 (oil on canvas).

Frida's predilection for these things was not of the kind of esotericism promoted by Breton and the surrealists. I believe it was derived from a complex constellation of factors: first, her religious spirit (religion as in *religare*, meaning "to unite with," not in the sense of a dogmatic body of beliefs and norms); the Catholic education her mother insisted she have; and its German Jewish counterpart inherited from her

father (which contributed the Bible, the kabbala and probably certain Masonic principles). Other elements are her possible fatalistic convictions, fed by incidents in her own life; the very physical person of Diego and some of the directions of his thought and culture; and on top of all this, the convergence between certain astrological premises and the cultural and religious heritage of our ancient Mesoamerican civilizations.

*None of Frida's paintings
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with any other country
than Mexico as its origin.*

On one occasion, she called herself “the great concealer,” and she also liked to call Diego “the architect of life.” She used to say, “You are the combination of all numbers.”

Frida began painting at the age of 19, in 1926, after her accident. Before that, she had clearly said that she wanted to study medicine, but she did not really pursue that intention with any fervor. However, art was not unknown to her; you could even say she had it in her genes. Very able at overcoming adversity, had she ever determined she wanted to, she would undoubtedly have become a doctor. Painting was a momentary solution that she was not fully conscious would be her road to realization.

Her first paintings, *Portrait of Alicia Galant* and *Self-Portrait* (1926), are “aristocratic.” Somehow they bring to mind Roberto Montenegro in their pursuit of a refined aestheticism which they never quite achieve because of their freshness and the simultaneous rusticity of a first attempt. *Portrait of Miguel N. Lira*,⁵ one of her high school friends (who was, by the way, possessed of a profound knowledge of Chinese poetry), shows her aim of using a much broader pictorial vocabulary. Apart from the art deco elements upon which its composition is based, this painting has certain touches of Futurism that show the intention of seriously becoming involved in the perception and handling of form.

She did not continue on this road. Her personal circumstances, her fascination with herself and, above all, the enormous wealth of knowing how to see herself and how to associate her person with significant parts of her real and imaginary surroundings would lead her to paint introspec-

tive self-portraits as her main genre. Her particular form of introspection, especially from 1931 on, is full of symbolism that could well be confused with joys or fantasy. However, her fantasy is tinged neither with megalomania nor irrationality. It is profoundly realistic; it always deals in facts or the relationship among facts which for her were of the most absolute certainty. We cannot even speak here of an aim to bring pre-conscious factors to the fore because her constructions are deliberate and follow a complex but strict logic based on empirical experience, although it be saturated with elements from dreams or daydreams. These states are also experienced and, therefore, real.

The primary sources of Frida's painting are, then, in herself, and she is part of the “Mexican-ness” popular in the years when she began developing as a painter. None of her paintings could have been born of a spirit with any other country than Mexico as its origin. The critic and art historian Bertram D. Wolfe speaks of the hope (much more in the sense of “forward looking” than of “naive”), at once both happy and melancholy, with which Frida selected her motifs. Something similar can be found not only in the painting of former priests or nuns, but in folk art in general.⁶ Several of her works evoke the folk art form of the *retablo*,⁷ of which she formed a vast and fascinating collection, aided by Diego, as well as the Christian martyrologies. In some she looks like a lay saint, or a goddess, surrounded by her appointments, which, instead of crowns of roses or the palms of the martyr, are thorn collars, slightly muzzle-like pre-Hispanic jewels, or ribbons wound several times around her neck ambiguously suggesting the possibility of hanging. The shine of rigid lace becomes a nimbus or halo and, at the same time, a parapet in the two self-portraits in which she wears the headdress of women from Tehuantepec. The 1943 canvas has the image of Diego emerging from the double arch formed by her requisite joined eyebrows. The general structure recalls that of a great neuron and this reminds the viewer of Frida's enor-

⁵ This painting is on exhibit at the Modern Art Museum, on a three-year loan from the Tlaxcala Institute of Culture.

⁶ Teresa del Conde, “Lo popular en el arte de Frida Kahlo,” *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas*, no. 45, UNAM, Mexico City, 1976.

⁷ A *retablo* is both an altar-piece and, in Mexico, a painting, usually small, done on tin by the faithful to thank a particular saint for a miracle he or she has performed. These paintings, also called “miracles,” describe the problem that has been overcome. Part of Frida's large collection of these pieces of folk art is today exhibited in the Frida Kahlo Museum. [Translator's Note.]

mous interest in the microscopic world, the world of laboratory slides, of elemental organisms and cells ready to be inseminated.

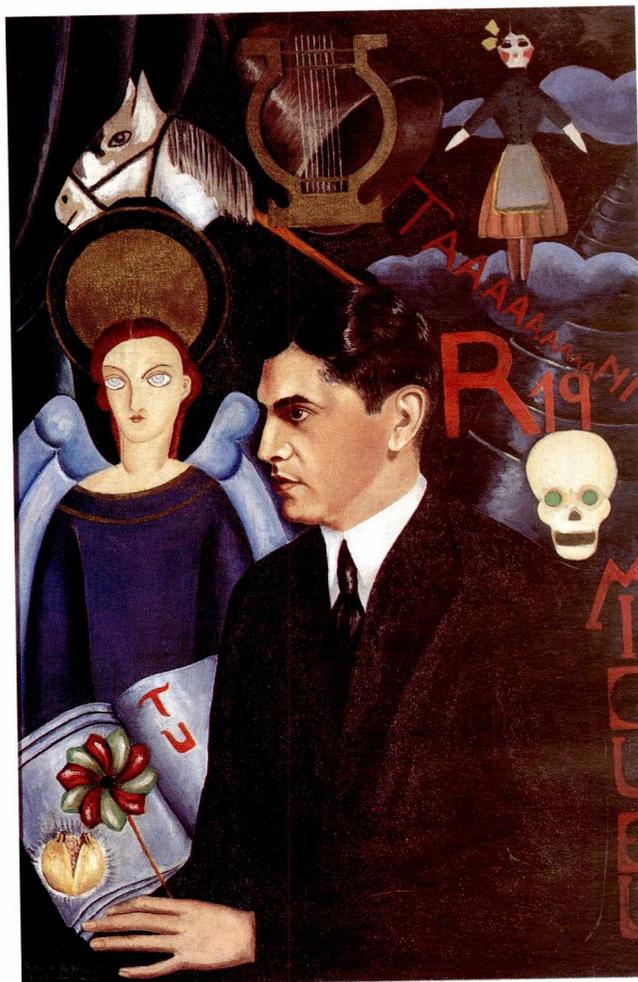
The Little Deer (1946) plays with, among other things, the principle of the dual sexuality of each individual, which Frida was profoundly convinced existed, perhaps without even needing to read Freud. The animal's body is that of a male deer. (Granizo, the little domesticated deer the Riveras owned, was the model.) The head is Frida's, with deer ears and antlers. The horns probably symbolize something more (like feeling that she was being cuckolded by Diego)⁸ and this element also probably combines with the pain inflicted by the arrows piercing the animal's body. Naturally the images of Saint Sebastian and *La Dolorosa* (Our Lady of Pain) come immediately to mind: we should remember that, according to legend, Saint Sebastian was not killed by the shower of arrows, but lived an active life for many more years. Likewise, tradition has it that Mary did not die from her pain, but became an active promotor of the faith and, according to the Apocrypha, she became a "wise woman." Frida would not die of the arrows that in her 1946 painting combine with a live branch of a young tree the trunk of which has been cut away.

Frida dressed in black, rested and serene, walking slowly through the halls of her house in Coyoacán accompanied by her monkey Guayabito and her dog Xólotl; Frida outspoken and using vulgar language, captivating the attention of the Mexican and foreign elites at the January 1940 inauguration of the Gallery of Mexican Art surrealist exhibition; Frida the teacher, giving instructions to her pupils, Arturo García Bustos, Guillermo Monroy, Fanny Rabel and Arturo Estrada.

"Doña Frida de Rivera
A modern painter
says, 'You must paint life'
Let's leave school behind."⁹

⁸ This is a play on words based on the same root of the word for horns or antlers (*cornamenta*) and to be cuckolded (*ser cornuda* or *sentirse cornamentada*, literally "to have the horns put on you"). [Translator's Note.]

⁹ The verse is taken from a *corrido*, a type of popular Mexican song, composed by Erasmo Vázquez Landeche to decorate the walls of the La Rosita *pulque* saloon.



Portrait of Miguel N. Lira, 1927 (oil on canvas).

Frida desperate, weepy, on the brink of hysterics because she knows she can never have the children she wants so badly; Frida enthusiastic and seductive, with all her attention focused on Trotsky; Frida painting Stalin's portrait almost on the eve of her death; Frida given over to Diego like a solicitous, loving mother and at the same time a young comrade, capable of making sagacious, penetrating criticisms of his work, which she valued above all things; Frida jealous, resorting to escapism to free herself from the ponderous image of her spouse; Frida bringing her adolescent love for Alejandro Gómez Arias up to date through experiences with other, later, friends; Frida deciding to paint "to earn her living" and not just as a form of exorcism or self-projection; Frida in private, writing rhyming prose, sometimes critical, others elemental, in that diary of hers that has now been published in



Photo: Arturo Píera

Portrait of Alicia Galant, 1927 (oil on canvas).

a facsimile version;¹⁰ Frida generous and open, moving heaven and earth to help people in trouble, whether she knew them or not; Frida childish, dressing her dolls and her cardboard Judases¹¹ with all the love of a little girl playing “mommy”; Frida admired by Kandinsky, Breton, Ernst, Picasso and Noguchi, all smiles, malice, satire and charm; Frida writing “Diego and I” at the same time that her lawyer sent her the papers for a divorce that would last only a year; Frida truly mourning her mother, “the little bell of Oaxaca,” who had epileptic attacks in sympathy with those of her husband, the great photographer Guillermo Kahlo; Frida impassive, threatening, dressed as a man, seated in a yellow chair holding the open scissors with which she cut her long hair, surrounded by the locks and hacked braids that have taken on their own life in her 1941 *Self-Portrait*.

“If I loved you for your hair,
Now that it’s cropped, I don’t love you any more.”

¹⁰ “Diario de Frida,” *Frida Kahlo: Diario autorretrato íntimo*, Harry N. Abrams, Inc. and La vaca independiente, Verona, Italy, 1995. This book was reviewed in *Voices of Mexico*, no. 34, January-March 1996, p. 25.

¹¹ Cardboard figures of devils representing Judas, traditionally sold in Mexico before Good Friday when they are burned in effigy. [Translator’s Note.]

Frida provoking in others that sense of humor shaded with sexuality, double entendre and sometimes necrophilia, one more aspect of her creativity.

“I like your name, Frida,
but I like you more
in the ‘Fri-dom’ of your decision
and in the end, because you give.¹²
Seeing the down on your lip,
like a bald little boy
I feel it would be my joy
to become a queer.”¹³

Frida heroic, attending in her wheelchair with her almost disintegrated body the Communist demonstration to protest the overthrow of Jacobo Arbenz, the president of Guatemala victimized by the CIA; Frida painting a blazing still life, pulsating with life a few days before her death; Frida painted by Diego in *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon at the Alameda*, dressed in the white costume of the women from Tehuantepec, holding in her left hand a sphere with the signs of ying and yang, the principles of life and death, of the light and the shade, of the soul of darkness and light.

All this and much more form the image of the unconventional and wilful woman, who was honest with herself, theatrical to the marrow of her mutilated bones, on occasion a snob, truly convinced of her political positions that gradually changed and that she betrayed, but that she reaffirmed in her conscience throughout her whole life.

Today, a “star,” she is the best known, most sought after and idolized woman painter in Latin America and the world, and not only because of her small *opus* nor the mass reproduction of the most beloved of all her works, *The Two Fridas*.¹⁴ Her person, her existence, made a work of art in itself, by herself, her acts, have been elevated to the level of myth. But what will endure as of genuine value is her painting. **W**

¹² The poet is playing with the two syllables of the name Frida: “Fri-” equals “free”, the English word, and “da” the Spanish word for “give.” [Translator’s Note.]

¹³ I found these lines in the correspondence file at the Frida Kahlo Museum in Coyoacán. I did not, however, find the author’s name. I quoted them in *Frida Kahlo*, a small volume published in 1976 by the Ministry of the Presidency.

¹⁴ This piece is venerated more than valued and enjoyed by visitors to the Modern Art Museum in Chapultepec Park, sometimes with the only aim of coming face to face with her.