Frida Kahlo: A multimedia exploration of the human spirit and pain management

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FRIDA KAHLO, A MULTIMEDIA EXPLORATION OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT AND PAIN MANAGEMENT

By

Galen Haye

A Senior Thesis Submitted to the

Eastern Michigan University

Honors Program

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation

with Honors in the Art Department

Approved at Ypsilanti, Michigan, on this date 19 December 2004
Biographical Information

Frida Kahlo was born Magdalena Carmen Frieda Kahlo y Calderon on July 6, 1907, to Matilde Calderon (the daughter of Antonio Calderon, a well-known photographer of Spanish and Indian descent) and Guillermo Kahlo (born Wilhelm, a Hungarian and German Jew who would later become one of Mexico’s most renowned photographers after learning from his father-in-law Antonio). As a young girl of six or seven, Frida contracted polio. Her right leg withered, and her right foot turned outward; she would live out the rest of her life with a limp. At the age of 18, Frida was on her way home from school when the bus in which she was riding was struck by a streetcar. She suffered severe injuries and was impaled by a metal handrail from the streetcar. Her spine was broken, and her pelvis shattered. She sustained several broken ribs and a broken collarbone. Her right foot was crushed, and her right leg fractured in eleven places. The pipe damaged her internal organs and left her barren. She would later suffer several devastating miscarriages, including one in Detroit while Diego was painting murals at the DIA. She spent the month after the traffic accident immobilized in a full-body cast. Doctors had little hope for her recovery, but she struggled through many sessions of painful physical rehabilitation and was able to walk unassisted within the year. Throughout her life, she would suffer numerous relapses that caused great pain and would leave her bedridden for months at a time. She underwent over 30 operations in her lifetime to help correct the damage to her spine and leg. There is debate as to the necessity of all these operations, and some scholars feel she may have used the operations as a method to hold Diego’s attention. Whatever the case, Frida became addicted to the
medicine prescribed for her pain and later turned to self-medication, using morphine and copious amounts of alcohol. "I drank to drown the pain," she confided to her diary, "but now the damned pain has learned how to swim." During the initial period of confinement after the accident, Frida’s mother gave her a set of paints and a special easel that could be used in bed to help allay her boredom—she took to art like a natural, and it became a therapeutic outlet to relieve some of her suffering.

Frida first met Diego Rivera, her future husband, when he was commissioned to paint a mural at her school. Never a shy girl, she approached him and asked him to teach her what he knew about painting. Being a man of traditional Mexican sensibilities, he doubted a woman could be any kind of serious painter and casually dismissed her. Frida persisted with her painting, and when she met him again a few years later introduced by photographer Tina Modotti, she showed him her work. Diego was impressed and soon became her mentor and greatest supporter. Diego found himself entranced by the dynamic and beautiful Frida, and despite a 20-year difference in age, on August 21, 1929, they were married. The marriage was tempestuous to say the least; their friends characterized it as a “marriage between an elephant and a dove”, comment not only on their physical differences but also on those of their temperaments. Diego had numerous affairs, including one with Frida’s younger sister in 1935. When Frida discovered him seducing Cristina, she embarked on her own sexual adventures including notorious liaisons with Leon Trotsky and Georgia O’Keeffe. It is unclear what finally triggered the decision, but in 1940 Frida and Diego were divorced. Despite his constant infidelities, Diego’s greatest passion would always be Frida, they were reunited a year later and
remarried in California. Although Frida undoubtedly loved Diego, she had seriously conflicted feelings about him, once proclaiming: "I suffered two grave accidents in my life. One in which a streetcar knocked me down ... The other accident is Diego."

Frida was born a few years after the Mexican Revolution, and the sense of revolution was a palpable force in her life. She was an ardent revolutionary and became a member of the Young Communist Party, earlier founded by Diego. Together they became a vibrant political and artistic nexus, surrounded by an international cultural elite. She was a proud and outspoken supporter of communism and once proclaimed: "I was a member of the Party before I met Diego, and I think I am a better Communist than he is or ever will be."

Frida identified with the common people of Mexico and, following a suggestion from Diego, wore almost exclusively traditional dress, including elaborate native hairstyles. She was a striking figure, well known for her beauty and fiery temper. She appeared on the cover of French Vogue during a trip to Europe and was feted by such artists as Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamps, Vasily Kandinsky, film maker Sergei Eisenstein, and the surrealist writer André Breton.

In the spring of 1953, Frida had her only exhibition in Mexico. She was so sick at the time that her doctors had warned her against attending. She ignored their advice and had herself carried in on a stretcher and placed into her previously positioned bed, where she held court late into the night, drinking and entertaining her friends. "I am not sick," she told them. "I am broken. But I am happy as long as I can paint." Later that year, her right leg became gangrenous and had to be amputated below the knee. This sent Frida into a
depression from which she would never recover. She died the next summer in 1954 after two suicide attempts. It is said she died in her sleep from an embolism, but suicide is also considered a strong possibility. No autopsy was ever performed. Her last words, written in her diary, read, “I hope the leaving is joyful, and I hope never to return.”

Frida’s painting conveys a potent mixture of emotion, reflecting her great strength of character as well as the pain of her profound suffering. Her paintings are vividly colourful and iconic. She incorporates a style based on Mexican folk art and the small votive retablos* characteristically found in local churches. She often painted self-portraits, stating, “I paint self-portraits because I am so often alone, because I am the person I know best.” The fact that she could never have children is a subject that informs her work, and she poignantly portrays herself holding the babies she would never know. Her work is infused with the pain she experienced throughout her life, but there is also a strength and heroism present. In her images, she might stand before us wounded in body but unbowed in spirit. Her style was unlike the grand masculine murals of Diego, but he was drawn to the inherent strength of her work, exclaiming after her first miscarriage, “Frida began work on a series of masterpieces which had no precedent in the history of art—paintings which exalted the feminine quality of truth, reality, cruelty and suffering. Never before had a woman put such agonized poetry on canvas as Frida did at this time in Detroit.”

André Breton was impressed with her work and organized a successful show at the Julian Levy Gallery in New York. “I never knew I was a surrealist,” she stated, “till André

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Breton came to Mexico and told me I was”. Although she exhibited successfully in New York, and to a lesser extent in Paris, she herself refused to be labeled a Surrealist, and distanced herself from the movement, saying “They thought I was a Surrealist but I wasn’t. I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality.”

**Conceptualisation**

My Honors Thesis pursues an inquiry into the interrelationships among various forms of art by producing a dynamic, interactive work that links the visual art disciplines of painting, sculpture and furniture design by exploring the life of Frida Kahlo through these various media. The concept of the piece shows elements of Kahlo’s life in both representational and nonrepresentational methods. The idea is to stimulate thought on the hardships she overcame and endured, allowing the viewer to draw comparisons with his or her own life and to possibly realise the indomitability of the human spirit. This mixed media presentation weaves a theme that resolves the problematic aspects of joining diverse disciplines into a unified whole while evoking and expressing the force and pain felt within Kahlo’s life. A literary element is introduced through creative and biographical excerpts alongside the main piece that will explain the concept and introduce viewers to Frida Kahlo.

The finished piece features a shape derived through sculptural explorations with my faculty advisor, after experimenting with elements that harmonize with the overall composition. The initial concept was based on an elongated tetrahedral structure using
fine hardwood joined by traditional woodworking techniques. The structure, as it
developed, became a more free-flowing sculptural entity with the panels separated and
supported by three individual wooden pedestals interconnected with steel piping. It is
constructed to allow the panels to swivel, permitting all sides to be viewed but never at
the same time. This adds a fourth dimension by encouraging the viewer to walk around
the piece, experiencing the images over time. I believe it will foster a sense of
anticipation and invite interaction.

The repetition of triangular forms, both the panels and the footprint, are intended to
represent the element of femininity. It is my hope that viewers will find themselves
interested and inspired by the life, ordeals, and accomplishments of Frida Kahlo and seek
to understand how her life and struggles are related to their own.

**Interpretation**

The fact that the panels are two-sided is meant to represent the seen and unseen,
illustrating that the visible is not always the totality. There may be a different reality
hidden from the observer just beyond reach. The textured surface is evocative of the pain
and turmoil that Frida experienced throughout her life, the colours loosely chosen to
represent the three prevailing influences in her life, i.e., her parents and Diego Rivera.
The cloth collages tell the story of her accident and the mourning over her inability to
bear children with the subsequent devastating miscarriages. The final and highest panel
portrays the hubris of modern medicine, which, in its blindness, so often leads to further
human suffering. In the case of Frida, like many patients before and after, the number of
possibly unnecessary invasive procedures left her wracked with excruciating pain, and
the level of prescribed medication escalated to the point where she became addicted to
morphine and Demerol. It is doubtless that the gangrene she contracted in the final year
of her life was a result of one of the innumerable surgeries performed on her right leg. It
can then be argued that the amputation that followed became a direct cause of her death,
either by the agency of an embolism or by the suicidal depression that resulted.

The bases represent various stages in the life of Frida Kahlo. The playfulness of the
smaller base conveys the exuberance of a young girl in a frilly dress, possibly on her way
to church under the watchful eye of her mother. The next portrays Frida as a confident,
outspoken schoolgirl before the accident, in her Preparatoria uniform. The third and
tallest base symbolises Frida as an adult immobilised by a body cast following the first of
many surgical procedures. The surface of the wood itself is dichotomous: on one hand,
smooth and polished; on the other, cracked and splitting. This contrast is evocative of the
pain that wracked her body and overwhelmed her life. The bases have all been impaled
with steel pipe—a unifying feature for the piece—but more importantly, a reminder that
what happened to an innocent young woman could just as easily happen to any of us.

Fabrication

I have been planning the theme and the various components of this piece for the last three
semesters together with input from my three-dimensional design advisor, Assistant
Professor John DeHoog, and my painting advisor, Assistant Professor Chris Hyndman. The project is a continuation and refinement of skills and techniques that I learned in earlier classes with my advisors and have applied in an unconventional manner. An initial model incorporating a tetrahedral design was constructed prior to the creation of the six panels. This design was later revised after a suggestion from Professor DeHoog to relate more closely with the chaos and instability of Frida’s life. The tetrahedron was discarded in favour of the open triangular object that is suffused with kinetic energy. The design took into consideration the shape of the existing panels and was created to intensify and harmonise with those elements.

This piece required a considerable amount of skill and patience to execute. Like all projects involving the use of wood in a sculptural context, there were unexpected problems that arose, and I was forced to deal with them as they occurred. It required a great deal of dexterity and conceptualization and drew on my artistic and mechanical abilities to resolve the inherent challenges and to successfully make this piece work as a cohesive, meaningful whole and not just an assortment of unrelated parts.

Everything about this piece incorporated techniques that were new to me. The painted panels were created after consultation with Mary Penn using plaster that was applied with force, wet upon wet, to form a pock-marked and heaving texture. Shellac was applied to seal the plaster and then paint was used to intensify the dimensionality and character of the skin. The collage panels were inspired by work I had seen earlier in Professor Hyndman’s painting class using layers of transparent tissue paper. I chose cloth for my
panels and used the interplay of colour and texture to convey the confusion and violence of Frida's accident symbolically rather than graphically. Two panels incorporate cloth in a more figurative manner with the addition of rubber-molded arms cast from life to convey a palpable human presence. One panel shows Frida in a wedding dress, blood leaking from under her hand. This image is based on her painting *Two Fridas* which will be on display during the show and symbolises her grief over her inability to bear children and the pain of her everyday life. The third panel is similar in construction; in this case, two arms are used with the addition of a period-correct, antique syringe to tell the story. The molded arms show an amazing humanity and have been left in a rough condition purposely to intensify the emotional content as well as to convey the repeated medical intrusions into Frida's body.

The wooden, sculptural aspect of the project also took me into new territory. Turning the bases on the lathe was a new experience. I spent many hours refining the shapes and curves to tell the story I wanted them to relate. Sanding was another revelation. The sheer amount of time and physical involvement was a surprise. I do not think I would have minded so much if I was not breathing into a hot, humid mask for hours on end while trying to peer through fogged and dusty safety glasses. Anyway, I am happy with the final result, and feel a little discomfort is a small price to pay, especially considering the subject of my piece.

Framing the panels was a straightforward, if time-consuming task. I had to find the angles for the mitre cuts by trial and error as there were no mitre gauges in the shop with
accurate readouts for the angle I was working with. Cutting the finger joints was also a painstaking process, and an expert will be able to detect the mistakes of a novice. I can legitimately claim that the slight offset between the pairs of joints represents the disparity between the length of Frida's legs after her bout with polio, and who could argue with me? The mounts for the panels required a certain amount of mechanical ingenuity. I resolved the stability problem by using a steel rod bolted into a reinforcing plate inside the base of each panel. They fit snuggly into purpose-built bushings that allow the panels to swivel easily or be removed for transportation.

I enjoyed the challenge involved with the conceptualisation and construction of this piece. It taught me a lot about various techniques that were previously unfamiliar, but most of all, it awakened me to the courageous spirit of Frida Kahlo. I only hope some of her strength and character is conveyed to the viewer through this piece.

In closing, I would like to thank my advisors, Chris Hyndman and John DeHoog for their help and guidance. I would also like to thank Erica Murphy for her unwavering support during this process, as well as her editorial and computer skills, which allowed me to create this written Thesis. Finally, I would like to thank Professor Richard Rubenfeld of the Art History Department for reviewing the historical section of the Thesis and Professor Barry Hall of the English Department for kindly consenting to be my editor. I could not have produced a work of this caliber without their help.
Frida Kahlo, Bibliography


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**Conceptualisation**

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