

Frida Kahlo in Philadelphia
Life and Death
Philadelphia Museum of Art, February 20-May 18, 2008

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This spring, the Philadelphia Museum of Art sustained its commitment to Surrealism as well as to Latin American art by hosting the exhibition *Frida Kahlo*. Organized by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in association with the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the show began at the Walker, traveled to Philadelphia where it was on view from February 20 until May 18, and will end at SFMoMA. Elizabeth Carpenter of the Walker and Kahlo biographer Hayden Herrera curated the show. The catalogue includes essays by Carpenter, Herrera and Victor Zamudio-Taylor.¹

Along with *Frida Kahlo 1907.2007* at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City, the exhibition celebrates the centennial of Kahlo's birth.² While not quite as lavish as the Mexican retrospective, the American exhibition offers an impressive ensemble of paintings along with photographs from the Vicente Wolf collection. The curators can be congratulated on undertaking the difficult but laudable aim of seriously presenting the work of an artist whose status as popular icon often eclipses her creative achievements. Since her death in 1954, Kahlo has been transformed from a relatively unknown painter to a cultural celebrity, the exotic subject of cinema and fashion, and a symbol either for women world wide or for Mexican national pride. When an artist has gained such iconic fame, the surrender to hagiography becomes inevitable. Yet in the case of Frida Kahlo, her cult status results from more than the driving forces of commercial consumption and popular idolatry. One could argue that Kahlo's posthumous fate arises from her own initiative. In image after image, Kahlo represented herself in the language of martyrdom. She mined the history of religious art, assimilating a range of sources from ancient Roman and Pre-Columbian art, to Renaissance Portraiture and the art of the twentieth-century German *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement.

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The introductory wall text for the Philadelphia exhibition, paraphrased from Walker Art Center director Kathy Halbreich's foreword in the catalogue, asserts that in Kahlo's work "the cosmos, the earth, and the body are merged with the everyday, often permitting shockingly personal depictions of her physical and psychological pain to bleed into the iconography of Mexico's Aztec, colonial, and revolutionary history." Too often the "shockingly personal" aspects of Kahlo's art trump the rich variety of formal and iconographic references distilled within them. Curator Michael Taylor, assistant Emily Hage and those who worked on the Philadelphia venue can be praised for providing art historical context by including some of these Aztec and colonial sources in the exhibition. In one gallery viewers can compare works such as *The Suicide of Dorothy Hale*, 1939 and *A Few Small Nips*, 1935 to the nineteenth century Mexican ex-votos that inspired them. Awareness that Kahlo adopted both the ritualistic intent and the visual qualities of these folk objects adds to our appreciation of her skills as an artist without lessening our reaction to the visceral quality of the images. These particular examples achieve the aura of cult objects. In each case, by extending the bloody depiction of a women's violent death to the frame itself, she conflates painting and bleeding, and suggests a powerful empathetic bond between artist and subject.

To a certain extent, the blood spattered frames of *The Suicide of Dorothy Hale* and *A Few Small Nips* distinguish these works from the rest of those in the exhibition. When Kahlo depicts her own pain, she is more dispassionate in the execution. This contradiction between intimacy and distance resonates throughout the exhibition. She diffuses the expressive potential of her depictions of bodily suffering and emotional trauma through symbolism. While intimate in scale, personal in content, her often overwrought iconography demands to be read, not felt. Possibly, it is just this affective distance which provides the shock factor. As a therapeutic model, it makes sense. Subject to her body in life, she sought to control the image of her body in her art and costume. Her impassive face, her dry, precise method of painting, her complex iconography, impart to the viewer a sense of rigid control. Presented with a multitude of photographic and painted images the viewer marvels at her control over her public and artistic persona, her technique, and her legacy.

As they enter the exhibition at the Philadelphia venue, viewers face Kahlo's *Self Portrait with Monkeys* from 1943. In this elegant, long-necked portrait, the slight turn of the head gives the impression that the painted Frida shifts her eyes to look out and slightly down at the viewers. At the same time, her turned head directs them towards the rest of the show, or more specifically to the well known double portrait *Frieda and Diego Rivera* of 1931. Pausing to read the wall text, the viewers are literally

caught between two Fridas: the artist, whose self contained poise contrasts to the inquisitive little monkeys admiring her, and the wife of Diego Rivera, tilting her head deferentially to the giant Rivera who both wears the pants and holds the palette. The theme of multiple constructed identities runs throughout the entire exhibition, culminating of course in the large painting *The Two Fridas*, 1939, and supported by other works which present the artist as the locus for different conflicting traditions and backgrounds, such as *Self-Portrait on the Border Line between Mexico and the United States*, 1932 and *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I (Family Tree)*, 1936.

The idea that Kahlo embodied multiple identities also dominates the presentation of photographs from the Vicente Wolf collection which constitute a large portion of the exhibition. In fact, after the two paintings which introduce the show, viewers must circumnavigate three small rooms devoted to photographs before continuing with the exhibition. Personally, I found this to be somewhat of an interruption and quite a bottleneck. It struck me as rather humorous that the wall text of the first room, paraphrasing Carpenter's catalogue essay, tells us that photographic representations of Kahlo and Rivera are so numerous that they are "utterly inescapable." The layout of the exhibition certainly made them inescapable. Possibly the photographs were placed so as to slow down the flow of visitors entering the painting galleries, but I wish they had been located at the end of the exhibition, or in side galleries, or just edited down a bit.

Carpenter's catalogue essay, "Photographic Memory, A Life (and Death) in Pictures," succeeds where the exhibition was less successful.³ Offering historical context for a careful selection of photographs, Carpenter evokes a complicated multifaceted life and personality. In the exhibition, the plethora of photographs acts as testament to the complex multiple identities of the artist, but what emerged for me is the consistency of the image Frida constructed. Through sheer repetition, this singular image eventually transcends the variety of representations offered. Maybe the concept of constructed identities has become somewhat of a cliché? Or maybe it is just an accepted part of our world? The exhibition includes many snapshots and family photos which suggest comparison with our own photographic histories. For each of us, so many images accumulate over a life time, at various ages, playing various roles that we can easily accept the multitude of identities photography constructs for us. What seems so striking about the photographs of Frida is the particular iconic image that emerges and remains in memory. She worked hard on this image, refining it through costume, hair, jewelry and surroundings. But whether performed or painted, she presents herself as a cipher, exposed but unknowable.

In his catalogue essay, "Frida Kahlo, Mexican Modernist," Victor Zamudio-

Taylor writes eloquently on the suspension of oppositions at play within Kahlo's persona, socialist and socialite, etc. He declares that "...along with the need to entertain paradox as fundamental to understanding her oeuvre and her personality, analysis must be freed from binary oppositions, so that contradictions are allowed to remain as such, resting unresolved in a discursive space that resists speculation, fantasy, and special interests."⁴ He refers to this as a "third space" of cultural hybridism, a meeting place of oppositions. His rhetoric recalls that of André Breton and his definition of Surrealism as a point at which oppositions meet. The appropriation of Kahlo for Surrealism by Breton engenders lively debate. Many find it necessary to liberate Kahlo from Surrealism. For example, in reviews of this exhibition in the *New Yorker* and *Philadelphia Enquirer*, both Peter Schjeldahl and Edward Sozanski unequivocally state that Kahlo is not a Surrealist.⁵ Kahlo herself famously said, "I never knew I was a Surrealist till André Breton came to Mexico and told me I was." As evidence critics often cite another statement of hers, "I never painted dreams, I painted my own reality."⁶

Maybe this is so, but her work resonated for Breton and it might still be constructive to view her work in terms of Surrealism. Like many of the artists associated with the group, Kahlo explored the psychology of the self, produced unexpected imagery through juxtaposition, and created an extended personal mythology. Breton found an authenticity to her work that was not necessarily naïve. I suggest that there is also something of the uncanny, particularly in her self-portraits. In a series of beautiful portraits, she surrounds herself by life including lush flora and animated fauna, but the stillness of her face, the stylized features recall those of ancient Roman funeral portraits. The uncanny arises when death surfaces within life, and throughout this exhibition, in image after image, it is the specter of death that overtakes Kahlo's life.

The exhibition does justice to the religious overtones and humanity of her work. The transformation of life into death, of lived experience into symbolic language, of an individual into an iconic type, the contradiction of self into a multifaceted sign, achieves a certain dignity and pathos in her work—until one leaves the exhibition and enters the gift shop. There, the excessive repetition of Frida's face transforms icon into brand.

1 Elizabeth Carpenter, ed., *Frida Kahlo* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2007).

2 *Frida Kahlo 1907.2007* (Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 2008).

3 Elizabeth Carpenter, "Photographic Memory, A Life (and Death) in Pictures," *Frida Kahlo* (Minneapolis: The Walker Art Center, 2007), 37-55.

- 4 Victor Zamudio-Taylor, "Frida Kahlo, Mexican Modernist," *Frida Kahlo* (Minneapolis: The Walker Art Center, 2007), 17.
- 5 Peter Schjeldahl, "All Souls, The Frida Kahlo Cult," *The New Yorker*, November 5, 2007; Edward J. Sozanski, "Art: Painting Suffused with Pain," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 24, 2008.
- 6 Zamudio-Taylor, 31.