

# A vital and challenging exhibition

Viva la Vida —Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera and Mexican Modernism  
City Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand 29 January-30 April

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A significant exhibition of twentieth century Mexican art, focusing on the work of Diego Rivera and his wife Frida Kahlo is currently showing at the City Art Gallery in Wellington, as part of the New Zealand Arts Festival 2000. This exhibition— *Viva la Vida—Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera and Mexican Modernism* —which has already drawn considerable public interest, brings to a new audience important work by the movement of artists associated with the Mexican revolution and the social struggles of the 1920s to the 1940s.

The works, from the private collection of Jacques and Natasha Gelman, features 12 paintings by Kahlo, 10 by Rivera and works by 22 other artists representing the modernist tradition in Mexico. Included are pieces by Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros who are considered, along with Rivera, to be the key figures of Mexican muralism. Accompanying the art works is an exhibition of photographs by internationally known American and Mexican photographers capturing the lives of Rivera and Kahlo, whose relationship was bound by common political and artistic convictions.

Most of the 80 photographs show the private life of the couple, many of them catching the two in moments of unposed and unguarded intimacy. However there is one of them leading a group from the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors in a 1929 demonstration through Mexico City in favour of workers' rights. Another shows Kahlo, wheel-chair bound after a life of physical suffering, protesting against CIA involvement in the overthrow of the Arbenz government of Guatemala, just days before her death in 1954 at the age of 47.

One aspect of the public presentation by Wellington's City Gallery deserves comment. The promotion and advertising is predominantly oriented so as to appeal to the preoccupation with personal identity that has dominated New Zealand intellectual, cultural and political life over the recent period. This essentially proclaims that non-class issues to do with gender, ethnicity or sexual preference should be regarded as the foundation of social experience and understanding. The exhibition's advertising material focuses on Kahlo, glorifying her persona as a strong-willed, individual woman, with only minor and incomplete references to the social and political environment of which she was part. Some of the more salacious aspects of her life and death are highlighted as a publicity draw card.

But any serious appraisal of Rivera, Kahlo and their works has to take into account the turbulent political times in which they lived and their response to it. When Kahlo and Rivera met in 1928 they were both members of the Mexican Communist Party. Rivera had been one of its founding members, but rebelled against the strictures of the Stalinist leadership over attempts to control his artistic endeavors in the name of "socialist realism". This theory, which was invented by the Stalinist bureaucracy in Russia, asserted that the great literary and cultural achievements of mankind as a whole should be rejected and a new art

based on glorifying an imagined "proletarian" culture built in its place. Rivera was secretary of the party when he was expelled in 1929. Kahlo ceased active membership of the party the following year, though sources are divided as to whether she formally resigned or not.

Both artists subsequently aligned themselves for a period with the Fourth International, founded by Russian revolutionary leader Leon Trotsky. Rivera was instrumental in influencing the Mexican government to secure a home for Trotsky after he had been exiled on the orders of Stalin. Trotsky and his wife, Natalia Sedova, arrived in Mexico in 1937 and moved into Kahlo's "Casa Azul"—the Blue House in Coyoacan, which was heavily fortified against the persistent threat of attempts on Trotsky's life by Stalin's agents. A number of the photographs in the exhibition were taken in the garden of this house, which Rivera and Kahlo shared with Trotsky.

Of the artists represented here, Siqueiros, who was the most powerfully wedded to Stalinism in politics and to the theory of socialist realism in art, gained infamy for his involvement in one of the failed attempts on Trotsky's life. As an artist, Siqueiros tried to urge Mexican artists to spurn easel painting and all art favoured by so-called "ultra intellectual" circles, claiming it was "aristocratic". He promoted in its place "monumental art", which he claimed as being superior because it was public property. Four of his works are on show in this exhibition.

In May, 1940, Siqueiros organised and led an armed raid by a 20-strong group of Stalinists on the Coyoacan house in an assassination bid on Trotsky's life. The raid, which was carried out under the direction of Stalin and the GPU, was backed by the Mexican Communist Party leadership. Just months later on August 20, the Stalinist agent Ramon Mercader, who had been infiltrated into the Fourth International, succeeded in murdering Trotsky.

While both artists had left the Communist Party, and were attracted to Trotsky and the Fourth International, the political relationship was not an easy one nor did they ever make a fundamental theoretical break with Stalinism. These unresolved issues led both of them back into the camp of Stalinism towards the end of their lives. In one of her last paintings (*Frida and Stalin*, c 1954), Kahlo depicts herself seated contemplatively beneath an enormous portrait of a benign and fatherly Stalin. As a political testament it speaks volumes.

A previous article on the *World Socialist Web Site* has detailed Rivera's life and work (see link). This present exhibition contains several of his well-known pieces. The *Calla Lily Vendor* (1943) is a sympathetic and humanistic depiction of peasant life. The glowing white of the mass of lilies, set against the dark earth tones of the two kneeling peasant women, lends the painting a radiance and timeless purity. In *Landscape with Cactus* (1931), Rivera explores the human-like qualities of cacti, assembling them into a group, which could be interpreted both as a family and as a representation of sexual relations in general, and of his and

Kahlo's complex and stormy relationship in particular. His *Self-Portrait* (1941), painted after a period of personal and political turbulence, presents the painter in a pensive, almost self-doubting, mood.

The particular strength and vitality of this exhibition, however, derives from the joint presentation of the works and lives of the two artists, which simultaneously draws out their common bonds, as well as the stark differences between them. A photo by Ernesto Reyes shows the couple on their wedding day, “an elephant and a dove”, he a man of huge proportions and presence, she almost diminutive, in Mexican native dress, possessing a delicate physical beauty.

As painters, the two were as opposite as they were physically, while both sought to express an essential humanity. Rivera became particularly well known for his public works, most especially many politically inspired murals. One of the more famous of these—a fresco commissioned for the Rockefeller Centre in New York, was pulled down when Rivera included a portrait of Lenin as the centrepiece, as a commentary on the necessity to overcome the social relations represented by Rockefeller and his class. Rivera described his own mission as “to reproduce the pure basic images of my land. I wanted my painting to reflect the social life of Mexico as I saw it, and through my vision of the truth to show the masses the outline of the future.”

By contrast, Kahlo was driven by the circumstances of her own life to produce a series of intensely personal self-portraits, which depicted a world of inner struggle and fierce determination to live. According to Rivera, Kahlo was “the first woman in the history of art to treat, with absolute and uncompromising honesty, one might say with impassive cruelty, those general and specific themes which exclusively affect women”. Elsewhere, he commended her as “the only example of in the history of art of an artist who tore open her chest and heart to reveal the biological truth of her feelings”.

Kahlo's paintings were a direct expression of the struggles that dominated her remarkable personal life. Born in Coyoacan in 1907, she turned to painting after an horrific road accident which, from the age of 18, left her in constant pain and required over 30 operations, including seven on her spine, until her death at age 47. The accident occurred when a tram hit a bus in which she was travelling, impaling her on a piece of metal. “The arms of the seat went through me like a sword into a bull” she later recalled. Her spinal column was broken in three places, and she received a fractured pelvis and numerous broken bones. Internal injuries left her unable to have children, but she would subsequently suffer an emotionally distressing series of miscarriages. In 1934 she required an operation in which she had several toes amputated, then, in 1953, her leg was amputated below the knee after gangrene developed in her right foot. Throughout her life, she was often required to be heavily medicated.

Three years after the accident, when she was 21, Kahlo met the Rivera, 20 years her senior. Although she had only been painting for a short time, Rivera was quick to recognise her artistic talent. Her paintings “communicated a vital sensuality, complemented by a merciless yet sensitive power of observation. It was obvious to me that this girl was an authentic artist”. They shared common sources of inspiration—Mexican folk art and the primitivism of Rousseau and Gauguin. Primitivism was a term used to designate the work of untrained artists who created forms outside the accepted rules of aesthetic principles. Their paintings often featured the use of brilliant colour, and the absence of perspective, which created the illusion of figures anchored in space. Many of Rivera's portraits, including *Modesta* in this exhibition, give their figures a deliberate two-dimensional quality, with flattened faces and tube-like limbs.

Rivera went on to introduce Kahlo to the major international art figures of their time, including Picasso. Andre Breton, who in 1938 collaborated with Trotsky in producing a manifesto on art and revolution, *Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art*, lauded Kahlo's work. He placed her art

within the surrealist tradition, albeit uncomfortably for the artist herself, and described her work as like “a ribbon around a bomb”.

Kahlo's self-portraits outwardly resemble many of the photographs of her in the accompanying exhibit. After the accident, her father had taken a photo of her in the hospital bed, a photo in which she saw a “battlefield of suffering” in her eyes. From then on, she resolved to only be photographed looking “straight at the lens, unflinching, unsmiling, determined to show that I was a good fighter to the end”. These characteristics dominate her portraits, but always her indomitable spirit is mixed with a sense of longing, sadness and loss.

Comparing the portraits with her photographs, one is struck by her refusal to depict her own physical beauty on canvas. It is almost as if she consciously sets out to deny it, replacing it instead with an intense severity. She consciously focuses on her facial hair, with heavily set eyebrows framing her burning eyes, like the wings of a bird in flight.

Is it this very human determination to live in the face of overwhelming odds that gives her paintings their great power and ability to transcend their immediate subject? Rivera wrote in 1943 “... the theme of her painting is the permanent miracle—life. Life that is always in flux, always changing and always the same in its movement through the veins and through the universe. A single life that contains the elements of all life. And if one tries to grasp its basis, one encounters abysmal depths, vertiginous heights, and an endlessly branching web that extends through the centuries, full of the light and shadows of life.”

In this exhibition, one is able to follow Kahlo's artistic and personal development. From the demure young bride in of *Self-Portrait with Necklace* (1933), her works of a decade later demonstrate a private and artistic assuredness. In *Self-Portrait as a Tehuana (Diego on my Mind)* (1943) and *Self-Portrait with Monkeys*, she presents herself as both the subject and object of the painting. One meets the eyes of a woman who is determined not to be a victim of personal misfortune, but as one who asserts immense inner strength. There is not an ounce of passivity here. Her works radiate with the vibrant colours of life.

Rivera and Kahlo's personal relationship was both public and famously tempestuous. They were first married in 1929, but both had a series of affairs and divorced in 1939, only to re-marry the following year. During the 1930's they were jointly regarded as central figures in the Mexican cultural landscape, although Kahlo's first solo exhibition in her own country did not appear until 1953, a year before her death. Kahlo is reported to have remarked that her life had been plagued by two accidents—the first was being run down in a bus, the other was meeting Diego Rivera.

Not all of her works are intense, single-minded self-portraits. In *The Bride Frightened at Seeing Life Opened* (1943), Kahlo exhibits a streak of sexual humour, depicting a virginal, doll-like bride figure peering out from behind an inviting display of voluptuous fruit, an acknowledgement of sensuality in nature and life. Her love for Rivera is symbolised in the complex *Love Embrace of the Universe, the Earth (Mexico), Diego, Me, and Senor Xolotl* (1949), which sees Rivera as a naked cherubic Buddah, cradled child-like in her arms, with the couple in turn embraced by mythological figures representing nature and Mexico.

Aspects of their relationship are strongly represented in her work. *Self-Portrait as a Tehuana (Diego on my Mind)* sees Kahlo superimpose a portrait of Rivera in the centre of her own forehead. It is almost like an Indian caste mark, but in this case appearing as a troubling presence, permanently in her consciousness. Rivera's image stands in contrast with the costume with which Kahlo frames herself, a Tehuana headdress associated with the traditional dress of the region of south-west Mexico. The “endlessly branching” web of life, described by Rivera, appears in the background, with Rivera's visage situated, almost spider-like at its centre.

The unsettling *Self-Portrait with Braid* (1941) was painted the year after Frida had shorn her hair following the divorce. After they were re-married

she figuratively re-gathered her locks and, turning them into an infinity symbol, placed them precariously back on her head. The resulting disjointed, almost alarming appearance which results indicates perhaps that she always knew the marriage would never be anything other than difficult.

Regardless, the lives and work of the two artists were inextricably intertwined. During the final years before her death, Kahlo confessed to frequently looking toward suicide. She wrote: “It’s been like centuries of torture and at moments I almost lost my mind. I keep wanting to commit suicide. Diego is the one that holds me back, for I am so vain that I believe he needs me. He has told me so and I believe it...” After her death, from complications brought on by pneumonia, Rivera appeared to physically wilt. His own health deteriorated, and he died three years later.

Each had the highest regard for the other’s work. She described Rivera as “an architect in his paintings, in his thinking process, and in his passionate desire to build a functional, solid and harmonious society... He fights at every moment to overcome mankind’s fear and stupidity.” Rivera in turn observed near the end of Kahlo’s life: “It is not tragedy that rules Frida’s work... The darkness of her pain is just a velvet background for the marvelous light of her physical strength, her delicate sensibility, her bright intelligence, and her invincible strength as she struggles to live and show her fellow humans how to resist hostile forces and come out triumphant...”

*Viva la Vida* —Long Live Life—is an appropriate title for this vital and challenging exhibition.

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In preparing the article the author referred to: Documents accompanying the exhibition by Gregory O’Brien and *Frida Kahlo—the brush of anguish* by Martha Zamora (Chronicle Books).



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