

Demythologising requires a political appraisal

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Frida Kahlo at the Tate Modern, London, through 9 October 2005

Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) produced some of the most instantly recognisable artwork of the twentieth century. Her iconic self-portraits have been extensively reproduced. They have been annexed to any number of political currents, particularly around identity politics. The impact of external political developments on her work has been seen largely in a one-dimensional manner. As a result, commentators have tended to laud or condemn her work, depending on their attitude to those developments.

This provides an object lesson in how not to look at art or artists. The question, though, is whether such a mythologised artist as Kahlo can be retrieved from this kind of simplification. This current exhibition goes some way towards showing how this might be done. That it does not completely succeed raises some of the major political questions which impacted on her life.

This is a big exhibition. Nearly 90 paintings and drawings are displayed in 11 rooms, organised thematically within a loosely chronological sequence. The exhibition notes that although autobiography is a component part of Kahlo's work, there is also an engagement with "wider cultural and political debates." This is the key to understanding the strengths and weaknesses evident here.

The broadly chronological approach reveals a number of stages in her development as an artist. She began painting in 1925, during her convalescence from a bus accident. Her spine was broken in three places, and her right leg, collarbone, ribs and pelvis were fractured. She suffered the crippling physical effects of this accident for the rest of her life. One small drawing from 1926 shows an almost childlike view of this trauma: for all the intensity of her later self-portraits, none shows the reality of the accident in any comparable way.

What we see in the two rooms of early works, though, is a self-taught painter coming to terms with both the medium and its history. Her earliest portraits are deeply influenced by Renaissance painters: She wrote to her boyfriend Alejandro Gomez Arias of *Self-Portrait Wearing a Velvet Dress* (1926), one of her first serious works, "Your 'Botticelli' is fine, but deep down you can see a certain sadness in her that, naturally, she cannot hide." Already her work was marked by self-awareness. There is an emotional intensity about her self-representations, certainly, but they are also based on artistic precedents. She was a serious student of art history, and this marked the early development of her work.

She was equally aware of the contemporary avant-garde. In several early works she experimented with cubist and futurist devices (as, for example, in her lettering in *Portrait of Manuel N. Lira*, or the geometrical landscapes in the very early *Urban Landscapes*). This is not, though, experimentation for its own sake. As the subject matter of several of these early paintings shows, she sought explicitly to identify herself with a progressive movement artistically and socially.

Kahlo's childhood years were coloured by the Mexican Revolution. In many of her self-consciously modernist early works, she identified herself explicitly with the leaders of the revolution and with the peasant army that had fought it. In *Pancho Villa and Adelita* (1927), for example, the canvas is broken into geometrical areas. At the right of the canvas is a modernist

construction, while at the left a group of peasant fighters ride a train. In the centre of the picture is a portrait of Villa, beneath which sits Kahlo, identifying herself with the female revolutionary fighters.

The exhibition is generally clear on the influence of the Mexican revolution on Kahlo's political and artistic development. Some of her earlier works were explicitly satirical, as for example the two watercolours of Santa Claus—San Baba ("St. Stupid"), representing Venustiano Carranza.

(Carranza had tried to install his own puppet candidate against Villa and Emiliano Zapata in the 1920 elections.) These paintings are slight enough, although their political explicitness is interesting: more important is the increasing use of symbols of Mexican national identity within her work. (In *Beauty Parlour* [1932], one of the San Baba watercolours, Baba is sucking a lollipop in the colours of the Mexican flag.)

The curators draw attention to the emphasis on *Mexicanidad* in her art—the post-revolution school of art that rejected Western European influences in favour of that deemed to be authentically Mexican, such as peasant handicrafts and pre-Columbian art. They are correct that it stems from her identification with the Mexican Revolution. However, like many others, Kahlo was drawn to the more radical nationalist rhetoric of the Mexican Communist Party, which still advanced itself as a revolutionary socialist organisation. Both she and Diego Rivera were members when they met in 1928.

Their relationship was to become the most important one in Kahlo's life. (She said she had experienced two great accidents in her life, the one on the bus, and Rivera.) He was already one of the foremost Mexican artists when they met, and she sought his appraisal of her work. There is evidence that this was a serious attempt to assess her artistic qualities. (Her 1931 joint portrait of them was based in part on van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Marriage*, emphasising the course of her artistic education.)

Rivera, too, was a sympathetic political figure. A founding member of the Mexican Communist Party, he increasingly rebelled against the Stalinists' attempts to impose "socialist realism" on him as an artist. In 1929, the year they married, Rivera was expelled from the party. Kahlo ceased party activity the following year.

This is where the exhibition shows its political weaknesses. In 1929 Kahlo produced another broadly satirical piece, *The Bus*. Here she used a naïve folk style to juxtapose class types on a bus. Here are town and country, bourgeois and worker. It is not a terribly sophisticated work either politically or artistically, with the characters bordering on parody (the capitalist sits clutching his money bag). She was, though, looking at class differences.

At the same time she was still using the iconography of Mexican peasant religion. In particular, she modelled paintings on Catholic *ex voto* offerings. Elements of these paintings, for example the dedication banners within the composition, had already appeared in her work. Kahlo, though, used the traditional form of thanksgiving to record appalling personal trauma, like her miscarriage, followed two months later by the death of her mother. Rivera was later to say that her work after the miscarriage was greater than before as she was able to "reveal the biological truth of her feelings."

These paintings are unflinchingly honest records of loss and pain, but their use of religious iconography is ambivalent. *My Birth* (1932) was completed after both the miscarriage and her mother's death. At the foot of the painting is a scroll. Traditionally in *ex voto* paintings, this would contain the thanks to the saint, but here it is blank. At the same time, above the bed is a portrait of the Virgin Mary, reflecting her mother's religious beliefs.

This reflects other peasant religious motifs used by Kahlo throughout her life. In particular, she returned several times to the image at the centre of the forehead. In some of her finer works this stands as a representation of an all-consuming thought. Later in her work, though, it was to become more obviously religious.

Kahlo travelled with Rivera to the United States, where he worked on several mural commissions. She found herself somewhat adrift. While Rivera was creating some of his most monumental political statements, Kahlo's work shows a certain political tension. The curators are keen to point to a work like *My Dress Hangs There* (1933) as a statement of her *Mexicanidad*. This is certainly true to some extent, but it is not the whole story.

In this work, Kahlo mocks the hollow acquisitiveness of US capitalism. A toilet stands atop a classical column, while a temple has steps made of a sales graph. At the foot of the painting there is a collage of images of unemployed workers. In the centre of all of this hangs her (empty) dress. This reflects concern over colonisation and is also a national gesture. In *Self-Portrait on the Borderline Between Mexico and the United States* (1932), for example, she stands holding a Mexican flag, while the electric goods on the American side of the canvas are putting down roots which connect with the Mexican plants.

Kahlo was ambivalent towards many avant-garde artistic movements. She was cautious, for example, about any identification of her work with surrealism, denying any knowledge of the movement. It is barely conceivable that this artist, whose early development was so informed by familiarity with contemporary trends in art, should not have known the surrealists' work. As the exhibition makes clear, she not only had a reasonable grasp of surrealism's aims and ideas, she also used several of its techniques. She was open in her admiration for individual artists such as Max Ernst, and she was prepared to be courted by the surrealists. She produced her great painting *The Two Fridas* (1939) for the "International Exhibition of Surrealism" held in Mexico City in 1940.

What is missing here is any discussion of the single most pressing political discussion taking place internationally, one of which she was definitely aware—the struggle against Stalinism. Both Rivera and Kahlo supported the Trotskyist movement for a crucial period. Rivera was active in persuading the Mexican government to offer Trotsky a home in 1937, during his exile from the Soviet Union. He also collaborated with Trotsky and André Breton in preparing the *Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art*.

The exhibition, though, does show that her (and Rivera's) political agreement with Trotskyism was always tenuous and her politics always had a radical nationalist character. Rivera and Trotsky had politically parted ways before Trotsky's assassination after Rivera had supported a right-wing nationalist candidate in that year's presidential elections.

Kahlo's own concern with the plight of the Mexican peasantry was framed in the terms of Mexican nationalism as indicated by the flags that proliferate throughout her still lifes—and it is difficult to discern the degree to which she or Rivera was theoretically and ideologically opposed to Stalinism other than in the artistic sphere.

In 1939 she separated from Rivera and divorced him: they remarried in 1940 after Trotsky's assassination by Stalinist agent Ramon Mercader. The iconic self-portraits for which she is now best known were produced to give her some financial independence from Rivera. Many of these are repetitive, and say less about their subject than the intense works of

emotional nakedness which went before.

The impact of these pressures, along with her declining health, took its toll after the assassination of Trotsky and at the height of the patriotic fervour engendered by the Second World War—during which both the Soviet Union and Mexico fought alongside the United States. Kahlo, who was still a technically capable painter (for example *Self-Portrait as a Tehuana* or *Diego on My Mind*), pursued an increasingly mystical strain in her paintings. Where previously she had used the icon of a thought in the middle of the forehead, it now became more openly a third eye and she more directly appealed to religious symbols.

Her paintings also reflect a greater bleakness at her physical condition: in *Roots* (1943), her reclining figure puts out roots in a barren landscape, while there is a void within her. In *The Broken Column* (1944) her shattered spine is replaced with a metal rod. After 1951 she was unable to paint without painkillers, and her work declined.

Politically, this demoralisation found its outlet in a turn back towards Stalinism. Both Rivera and Kahlo rejected the revolutionary politics they had espoused in the 1930s, Kahlo with the most vehemence and open hostility to both Trotsky and Trotskyism. Shortly after the Second World War—in 1948—she rejoined the Communist Party. Rivera's application for membership was opposed because of his past connections with Trotsky—he was only readmitted in 1954 after Kahlo's death. Kahlo had reportedly boasted, "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."

One of Kahlo's last paintings in 1954, the year of her death (not on display here), was a portrait of her sitting like a disciple under a giant painting of Stalin, *Stalin and I*.

The greatest example of her decline on display here is the large canvas *Moses* (1945).

This work, influenced by Freud's essay on the origins of monotheism, sought to bring together gods, heroes and masses. It is a deeply unpleasant spectacle: Marx and Lenin rub shoulders with Stalin and Gandhi on one side of the canvas, Hitler, Napoleon and Christ on the other. In the centre Moses has a Third Eye. Aztec and Egyptian gods appear at the top of the painting, while at the bottom one side is given over to masses waving Soviet flags, the other to crowds waving Nazi banners. Seven years before this farrago, Frida Kahlo had supported the Fourth International.

One frequent reaction to this exhibition has been that Kahlo "could not paint." This is simply untrue, although the quality of her work varies enormously. (The drawings, sometimes little more than doodles, do not give a very flattering view of her draughtsmanship.) This should not distract audiences from the Kahlo who painted the physical crises of her life with such fierce honesty, and who, at one point, had sought a revolutionary solution to the inequalities of the world.

At the same time, some critics have tried to hold her responsible for much of the febrile self-absorption that passes for contemporary art. But her later works are not all she was about. Without understanding the political processes at work on her, it is impossible to understand how her unflinching gaze on herself became self-pitying, and the manufacturing of icons.

Visit the Tate Online catalogue of the Kahlo exhibit at <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/kahlo>



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