

An opera and an art exhibition in New York focus on Mexican artists Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera

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El Último Sueño de Frida y Diego (*The Last Dream of Frida and Diego*), a recent opera on the lives of famed Mexican artists Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, received its New York City premiere at the Metropolitan Opera last month.

Composed by the award-winning Gabriela Lena Frank and with a libretto by Nilo Cruz, the opera was first mounted in San Diego in 2022, and has since been seen in San Francisco and Chicago. The New York production is a new one, however, created by the Brazilian director and choreographer Deborah Colker, with set design by Jon Bausor.

Bausor also designed a complementary exhibit of Rivera and Kahlo's artwork at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), *Frida and Diego: The Last Dream*. MoMA's permanent collection contains several significant pieces by both artists; the exhibition presents them as if they were a stage set for the opera.

It is rare for a new opera to take as its subject lives of such artistic and political weight. Both achieved the status of icons in the art history of the 20th century, and the WSWs has devoted much attention to the work of both Kahlo and Rivera. Rivera became world famous for his many murals, including in his native Mexico but also in New York, San Francisco and Detroit. Among his most renowned works are the Detroit Industry frescoes at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

Frida Kahlo—known especially for her self-portraits, the influence of the Mexican Revolution and indigenous elements in her work, and her experiments with surrealism and other avant-garde trends—began painting in the mid-1920s, while still a teenager. This was soon after she had been gravely injured in a bus accident, which would leave her with acute pain for the rest of her life.

The lives of Kahlo and Rivera were also linked to some of the most consequential events and issues of the century—the Mexican and especially the Russian Revolution, the struggle between Trotskyism and Stalinism, and the commitment of artists to the struggle for socialism. This is promising subject matter, but the work largely squanders any opportunity to deal with the actual lives of Rivera and Kahlo, instead largely retreating into spectacle and romantic biography.

The plot of the two-act opera is relatively simple. It is a magic realist-tinged fantasy that takes place on the Day of the Dead (*Día de Los Muertos*), the annual holiday celebrated in Mexico on

November 1 and 2, days on which families gather to remember and honor loved ones who have died. The Day of the Dead, blending indigenous and Catholic ritual, is not a mournful occasion.

The conceit of the opera libretto, set in 1957, is a reversal of the Greek myth of Orpheus and Euridice. A gravely ill Rivera pleads for his wife, who died in 1954, to return from the underworld. She appears in the second act, granting his wish, and after much reminiscing and visiting locations around Mexico City, Frida leads Diego to the land of the dead, where they will be reunited forever.

Gabriela Lena Frank's score is the opera's most impressive element. Frank, a composer of Peruvian and Jewish-American heritage whose earlier work has drawn on Andean folk traditions, has just won the 2026 Pulitzer Prize for *Picaflor: A Future Myth*, a symphony inspired by Frank's Peruvian heritage and her personal experience with the California wildfires. Her music has woven together pre-Columbian percussion elements, Latin American influences and European classical music into a language that is accessible while avoiding both sterile atonality and the blandness that mars much of contemporary opera. The use of marimba and celesta is prominent. Though not at all derivative, some of her music calls to mind the work of John Adams (*The Death of Klinghoffer*, *Doctor Atomic*).

The production itself is also handsomely mounted. The set design makes imaginative use of color and Mexican folk art, referencing some of Kahlo's and Rivera's art, as well as evoking a kind of dream world associated with the culture of the Day of the Dead. Conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin drew playing of sensitivity from the Met Orchestra.

Isabel Leonard, a mezzo-soprano in the prime of her career, was powerful as Frida, and veteran baritone Carlos Álvarez was also effective as Diego. A particularly important role is that of La Catrina, the Keeper of the Dead. This character was popularized by Rivera himself as a symbol of the Day of the Dead. A skeleton figure who dominates the stage with her voice and her dancing in the first act, she is the character who guides souls between the realms of the living and the dead. Soprano Gabriella Reyes stood out in this role. Her passionate and rhythmic vocal line, especially in the first act, was animatedly accompanied by dancers and the Metropolitan Opera Chorus.

These positive elements make the opera's fatal flaw—the absence

of any serious, concrete examination of the lives of Rivera and Kahlo—all the more glaring. The Day of the Dead, after all, is an occasion to reflect on the lives and legacy of those who have departed. But this is avoided in *El Último Sueño de Frida y Diego*.

On the flimsy premise that the opera is not a conventional biography, the libretto focuses almost exclusively on the volatile relationship between Diego and Frida. It gives us the Frida of the self-portraits and of physical pain, but not the Frida who opened her home, the Casa Azul, to the exiled revolutionary Leon Trotsky. Even the art of both Rivera and Kahlo is little more than a backdrop in this work, and their political activities are totally ignored.

Kahlo and Rivera were not merely remarkable artists whose marriage was unusually turbulent. They were, at critical moments of their lives, participants in the great political struggles of their era. Rivera was expelled by the Mexican Communist Party in 1929, initially opposing the dictates from Moscow on art, and soon exhibiting growing sympathy for the struggle of Leon Trotsky and the International Left Opposition. For most of the 1930s he and Frida Kahlo, whom he married in 1929, supported Trotsky's fight against the Stalinist bureaucracy. Rivera played a key role in convincing the government of Lázaro Cárdenas to offer Trotsky refuge in Mexico in 1937. In 1938 he co-authored, with Trotsky and André Breton, the "Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art." This document, written almost 90 years ago, rejecting the Stalinist lie of "socialist realism" and upholding both revolutionary commitment as well as freedom for artistic creation, retains its full significance today.

Rivera broke with Trotsky in 1939. Both he and Kahlo made their way back to Stalinism, a reflection of the defeats of the revolutionary struggles of the 1930s, but also the failure of either artist to ever fully assimilate the difference between revolutionary Marxism and the radical nationalism of the Mexican Revolution. As the WSWS noted back in 2002 in its analysis of the film *Frida*, "it seems safe to suggest that neither Rivera nor Kahlo—remarkable artists and not first and foremost political thinkers—ever understand the essence of Trotsky's struggle with the Stalinist bureaucracy ... and remained to one extent or another under the influence of Mexican nationalism."

Not all of this perhaps can be treated exhaustively, but the fact that all references to political struggle are missing in the new opera, including the collaboration of both Rivera and Kahlo with Trotsky, is indeed revealing. The problems of this new opera are bound up with the baleful influence of identity politics. Frida Kahlo in particular has been turned into a feminist and gay icon, above all the victim of mistreatment by Rivera. She has become a "brand," with her image adorning tote bags and coffee mugs. Rivera himself has been to some extent dismissed, as if an appreciation of Kahlo required the shrinking of Rivera's reputation. Álvarez himself, in a brief intermission interview during a performance, referred to his character as "the bad boy" of the opera. The great Mexican muralist is depicted as a depressed and despairing figure. This is the image of one of the greatest artistic figures of the 20th century that audiences are asked to take away from *El Último Sueño de Frida y Diego*.

While the MoMA exhibition suffers from some of the same

problems as the opera, and at times feels more like a co-branded marketing opportunity than a serious approach to these artists' work, it nevertheless offers the opportunity to see six of Kahlo's most significant paintings along with several of Rivera's murals and other sketches, and allows one to appreciate what resonated in their work, as well as their differences.

Part of the couple's image has derived in part from their differences: in physical size (her petiteness next to his bulk); in their ages (she was 20 years younger than he); in their clothes (his rumpled workman's overalls vs. her traditional Tehuana embroidered dresses.) They were a striking pair, which comes across in the photographs included in the show, particularly those by Lola Álvarez Bravo and Leo Matiz, as well as by Imogen Cunningham and Edward Weston, both significant modernist photographers drawn to the couple in Mexico in the late 1920s–30s.

The differences are further displayed by the diminutive scale of her paintings as compared to his boldly assertive and colorful murals, which is partly why it was rewarding to be able to see Kahlo's work up close. Kahlo's *Self-Portrait On The Border Between Mexico And The United States* (1932), her *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940) and *The Wounded Deer* (1946) in particular, are meticulously detailed. (Many were painted while Kahlo was confined to her bed.)

Often valorized for its intensely intimate depiction of pain, be it physical or emotional, Kahlo's work is also strikingly objective, as much as it appears fanciful and dream-like. Although grouped with surrealists, particularly through Rivera's association with André Breton, Kahlo did not see herself as part of any "School," and was often quite critical of many avant-garde circles.

For all their differences, and their often-tumultuous personal relationship, Kahlo and Rivera remained committed politically as well as fiercely loyal to one another as artists. Even though they returned to the camp of Stalinism, both conceived of their art as part of humanity's struggle for liberation. Their political trajectory amounted to a tragic repudiation of the revolutionary courage they displayed in the 1930s, but it did not of course negate their earlier contributions.

The political commitment of both Rivera and Kahlo is lost on the creators of *El Último Sueño de Frida y Diego*, as well as on the curators of the art exhibition at MoMA. But Rivera and Kahlo as simply a tormented husband and wife is hardly the lesson to be drawn by a more inquisitive viewer who examines the complex legacy of their lives and work more deeply. A serious and all-sided examination of the intertwined artistic and political careers of these two great artists has yet to be presented.



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