Frida: The Making of an Icon: Tate Modern's erasure of Frida Kahlo's politics

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Frida: The Making of an Icon, Tate Modern, London until January 3, 2027

Tate Modern's *Frida: The Making of an Icon*, sponsored by Bank of America as "Lead Global Supporter," brings together around 30 works by Frida Kahlo and hundreds of personal items. More than 200 other artworks by other artists, from her contemporaries to those who have appropriated her image since her death in 1954 are also on display.

The exhibition has been a huge commercial success, shattering the gallery's record for advance ticket sales. More than 41,000 tickets sold before it opened on June 25 with demand so high that queues stretched around the building and the ticketing website briefly crashed. Full-price tickets cost £25.

The show claims to interrogate the "Fridamania" surrounding Kahlo, yet it operates as one of its engines—manufacturing, circulating and profiting from the phenomenon it pretends to analyse. The gift shop is piled high with limited-edition catalogues, prints, custom apparel and tacky trinkets. Those who pay the steep entry price, endure the queues and wade through the self-absorption of the contemporary artists on display will learn little about Kahlo or the times she lived through.

That is because the exhibition is an extended presentation of the identity-politics curatorial class itself, engaged in repackaging Kahlo as someone who "rejected the notion of a fixed identity" and projected a "multivalent sense of self": avant-garde artist, self-taught painter, mestiza, political activist, devoted wife, bisexual woman, transgressor, disabled artist. This supposed liberation dissolves all concrete meaning, above all her politics.

Kahlo's early development was grounded in rigorous engagement with art history, from Renaissance portraiture to cubism. *Self Portrait in a Velvet Dress* (1926), painted after the 1925 bus accident that shattered her body, was sent to her estranged boyfriend as an emotional appeal. It already shows her command of symbolic staging: a stylised Renaissance pose, an intense frontal gaze, and a turbulent background signalling the psychological depth of her later work.

Yet this formal evolution is inseparable from her political evolution during some of the most convulsive decades of the twentieth century—written out of history by the exhibition. Kahlo was so identified with the upheaval of her generation that she shifted her birth year from 1907 to 1910, the year the Mexican Revolution erupted. Its popular objectives were never achieved—one ruling general replaced another—and the Russian Revolution exerted a powerful attraction on critical artists and intellectuals, who saw in it the path to complete the Mexican uprising.

There is no mention of Kahlo's political life, that she joined the Mexican Communist Party in 1928, the year she met Diego Rivera, or that she ceased party activity after Rivera's expulsion in 1929 for refusing to subordinate his art to Stalinist dictates. Rivera helped secure asylum in Mexico for Leon Trotsky, co-leader of the October Revolution and founder of the Red Army. In 1937 the exiled Bolshevik lived with his wife Natalia Sedova in Kahlo's family home, the Casa Azul. In 1938 Rivera collaborated with Trotsky and Surrealist leader André Breton on the *Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art*.

The 1930s—when Kahlo and Rivera aligned with Trotsky and the struggle against Stalinism—were her most creative years.

My Dress Hangs There (1933), Kahlo's only political work in the exhibition, exemplifies those years. Painted during her stay in the United States, it is left unexplained by an anodyne caption that merely depicts it as "Kahlo's ambivalence towards the United States." But it is a ferocious satire of American capitalism: a toilet perched on a classical column, a temple staircase rendered as a sales graph, unemployed workers shuffling in breadlines. At the centre hangs Kahlo's empty Tehuana dress, evoking a Mexican identity in a hostile landscape. Writing from the US, she declared: "I've learnt so much here and I'm more and more convinced it's only through communism that we can become human." Such a phrase clamours for investigation, but the Tate has none of it.

The Tehuana costume was a deliberate political and aesthetic gesture. Tehuana women, celebrated in post-revolutionary Mexico where women ran markets and controlled commerce, and the dress expressed an identification with indigenous and popular culture. But it belonged to Mexicanidad, a nationalism that substituted ethnic identity for class struggle, promoted by the ruling elite as "ideological cement" to paper over unresolved social divisions. Suspended empty over the American landscape, the dress becomes the emblem of a consciousness caught between societies, unable to ground its critique of capitalism beyond national belonging.

Yet the painting matters because, despite its weakness, it is fundamentally about class—something entirely absent from both exhibition and catalogue.

The Tate focuses on Kahlo's self-portraits, but *Self Portrait Dedicated to Leon Trotsky* (1937), the single most politically significant painting she ever made, is absent. This is not an

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oversight but a statement. Painted while Trotsky and Sedova lived in the Casa Azul, it is a full-length self-portrait of Kahlo holding a letter, framed by curtains like a stage. The dedication to Trotsky is written in her own hand. Shown at her first New York solo exhibition at the Julien Levy Gallery in 1938, it was reproduced by *Vogue*, which removed the dedication. Trotsky's name was too dangerous to print.

The work is the clearest documentary evidence of Kahlo's alignment with the anti-Stalinist Left Opposition, not an exploration of identity but a political commitment. Dated 1937 and written "with all my love," the dedication is a declaration of solidarity with a man Stalin had condemned to death. Within three years Trotsky was murdered in a house Kahlo helped him reach; within a decade she had rejoined the Stalinist party.

Of course, the exhibition is about Kahlo, but the virtual absence of Rivera, her lifelong partner and collaborator in art and politics, is one of its most revealing gestures. What the identity-politics curatorial class hates about Rivera is that he painted the class struggle on public walls for the masses and refused to subordinate his art to the ruling class; he is the living refutation of their entire method. This petty-bourgeois milieu has sought over the decades to destroy Rivera's reputation, so much so that one couple, viewing a 1929 marriage photo of the tall, overweight Rivera beside a diminutive Kahlo, felt no hesitation in exclaiming, "Oh, it's so obvious he was a predator."

Trotsky, writing in 1938 at the height of Rivera's sympathy with the Fourth International, put it with characteristic force: "Do you wish to see with your own eyes the hidden springs of the social revolution? Look at the frescoes of Rivera. Do you wish to know what revolutionary art is like? Look at the frescoes of Rivera… You have before you, not simply a 'painting', an object of passive aesthetic contemplation, but a living part of the class struggle. And it is at the same time a masterpiece!"

Nor should Kahlo's weaknesses be softened into the revolutionary gloss sometimes given her. The truth is more complex, and more instructive. Her politics, and Rivera's, always had a radical nationalist character, and their alignment with Trotskyism was tenuous outside the artistic sphere. Rivera and Trotsky had parted ways before the assassination, after Rivera backed a right-wing nationalist in the 1940 elections.

Both remained under the influence of Mexican nationalism and, chastened and demoralised, both reconciled with Stalin and Stalinism.

After Trotsky's murder Kahlo's work took an increasingly mystical turn. The symbol of a thought at the centre of the forehead became openly a "third eye"; she appealed more directly to religious symbols. She rejoined the Communist Party in 1948, reportedly boasting she was "a better Communist than he [Rivera] is or ever will be," and in 1954, painted *Stalin and I*, seated like a disciple beneath the dictator' portrait—a terrible political decline. This was the year of her death and the year Rivera sought readmittance to the Mexican Communist Party.

This is the version of Kahlo the exhibition elevates, the late, mystical figure, drained of concrete political content and repackaged as a fluid "multivalent self" and hollowed-out icon, safe to sponsor and to sell.

The testimony of Amalia Mesa-Bains, whose installations resemble altars, is the identity-politics method laid bare. Kahlo becomes "a spiritual presence… a touchstone in my own personal and physical struggles" for Mesa-Bains, reduced to a private, therapeutic resource. Mesa-Bains confesses she has "even imagined at times we were friends" but has "settled for embracing and embodying her as my antepasada or ancestor."

Yasumasa Morimura's *An Inner Dialogue with Frida Kahlo* (2001) is the most intellectually pretentious, rambling on about an "imaginary Frida" and identities that "dissolve and recombine". His own cross-dressing is presented as societal "transgression". He asserts that Kahlo's small paintings "have an emotional and compelling power to rival the grandest public artworks"—by which he means Rivera's and then asks whether, "rather than bringing about a temporary revolution in society" the artist's mission is "to create an eternal revolution in the human spirit." Morimura supplies here the credo of the entire exhibition.

Mary McCartney's *Being Frida (London)* (2000) is one of the weakest and most symptomatic images. McCartney reduces Kahlo to confession—"full of her own emotion and her own personality… a lot of honesty"—and pairs her with Tracey Emin, whose major Tate retrospective sits across the lobby, posed in bed in Tehuana dress as Kahlo's supposed heir. The pairing is the exhibition's argument made flesh: Kahlo the communist, painter of breadlines and the shattered body, handed down to Emin, the purest product of the very process Kahlo is now used to legitimise—a Young British Artist manufactured around Charles Saatchi's advertising fortune, built on Thatcher's 1979 campaign, whose aim "was not to buck the system but to get into it."

A joint Kahlo/Emin T-shirt on sale is the final confirmation: This is the culture industry's Kahlo—depoliticised, dehistoricised, safe, sold back to the public by the very class she indicted.

This is why Bank of America, fined billions for mortgage fraud and foreclosures impoverishing millions after the 2008 crash it helped cause, is happy to sponsor an exhibition that turns Kahlo into a hollowed-out icon.

Those who pay £25 and queue around the block are sold a fraud: told in the parting shot in Camila Fontenele's *Everyone Can Be Frida* that the summit of her legacy is the right to dress up as her. Frida Kahlo deserves better and so do they.

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