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Back issues

2011

Jan	Feb	Mar
Apr	May	Jun
Jul		Sep

2010

Jan	Feb	Mar
Apr	May	June
Jul		Sep
Oct	Nov	Dec

2009

Jan	Feb	Mar
Apr	May	Jun
Jul		Sep
Oct	Nov	Dec

2008

Jan	Feb	Mar
Apr	May	Jun
Jul		Sep
Oct	Nov	Dec

2007

Jan		
	May	Jun
Jul		Sep
Oct	Nov	Dec

2006

	Feb	Mar
Apr	May	Jun
Jul		Sep
Oct	Nov	Dec

2005

Jan	Feb	Mar
Apr	May	Jun

Frida Kahlo: a Life

Art Review by Mike Gonzalez, June 2005

There is much power and beauty in the work of Frida Kahlo, says Mike Gonzalez, who examines the life of this remarkable artist.

There are two houses in almost neighbouring streets in the Mexico City district of Coyoacan. One is spare and dark and surrounded by high walls; there is very little colour to break the monotony and its gate is usually locked. This was the house where Leon Trotsky lived and was murdered in 1940.

The other house is rich in colour, its thick outside walls washed in strong blues and reds. Inside the patio is a garden full of Mexican plants, pre-Columbian figures and huge brightly-painted Easter figures called 'Judases'. The house is full of folk art - the crudely painted ex-votos left by people who felt their life had been changed by divine intervention, and clay pots and plates all decorated in the same vibrant colours. There is a tiny bed with a mirror above it with a window that looks out onto the patio. Beside it is a studio, where an easel carries a portrait of Stalin painted by the owner of the Blue House - Frida Kahlo.

Elsewhere her paintings hang in what were once public rooms. They seem to share insistent themes - and to figure the iconic and instantly familiar face of the artist. Frida Kahlo was recognised immediately wherever she went in Mexico: she wore her hair in gathered dark plaits, in the Indian style; she took pride in the delicate moustache across her upper lip. Her clothes echoed her hair - she would dress in the embroidered shirts and wide floor-length skirts of the southern state of Oaxaca, and she would often paint herself in this guise.

The Blue House is still a calm and quiet place, a kind of refuge in a chaotic modern megalopolis. Its colour and dynamism reflect Kahlo's character, though not the turbulent and

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Jul Sep
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contradictory life she lived there. Her own story is tragic and uplifting, her painting provocative, daring and strange. Indeed in some ways her paintings are chapters in a long autobiography, paralleled and matched by her diaries, which were published much later. And in that complex history there is another looming presence which it is impossible to escape. Diego Rivera, a huge man who looked even more enormous beside the diminutive Kahlo, was a constant (but not faithful) companion. The relationship between the man who painted Mexico's history on the walls of its public buildings, and the woman who painted her own experience in such dramatic ways, was fraught with conflict and anger. So it is strange to see the two lace cloths which Frida embroidered with their names lying across the pillows of their bed.

In the atmosphere of Mexico in the 1930s and 1940s, painting was a highly political business. The world of art was dominated by the Muralists - Rivera, David Siqueiros and Jos \heartsuit Clemente Orozco - who had been commissioned by the Mexican government to create a symbolic language of cultural nationalism in the country's public spaces. But their involvement in the Muralist movement was not just an artistic choice - it was political too. Although all three leading Muralists were powerful personalities, their artistic practice was rooted in an idea of collective creation - and an equally powerful insistence that art was work, labour, and that artists were in that sense workers. It reflected the political views of all three - though they were different and often in deep tension, and painted in very different styles. Siqueiros was an active member of the Communist Party, Orozco a political sceptic whose belief in perhaps a more metaphysical kind of revolution pulled him towards anarchism. Rivera, for his part, was a dissident communist and an admirer of Trotsky (though perhaps more for his writings on art and literature than for his sustained political opposition to Stalin). That is why he sponsored Trotsky's political exile and received him into the Blue House when he first arrived in Mexico in search of refuge. Indeed it would be Siqueiros who led the first (failed) attempt on Trotsky's life nearly two years later.

So there is in Kahlo's life a curious blend of politics, painting, sentimentality and a harsh frankness about herself - a combination that seduced many people, and not only Leon Trotsky.

Freak accident

Born in 1907, just before the revolution of 1910 toppled a dictatorship and initiated a seven-year period of regional warfare and social struggle, Frida contracted polio at the age of six. Her right leg was badly affected and eventually amputated. As if that weren't enough to bear, she was terribly injured in a freak accident in 1925, when she was just 18. The tram she was riding collided with a bus and the tram's handrail penetrated her vagina. In an extra and tragic irony, someone on the tram had been carrying gold paint which spilled over Frida and the other passengers.

By then Frida was already an unconventional person. One of 30 female students at the 2,000-strong National Preparatory School, she had already been expelled once, and regularly fought with others over the controversial mural paintings at the school, or over the insults her physical disability provoked. But this did not stop her early and intense relationships with a woman and a man, or her challenges to conventional morality. In an early family photograph, for example, she is dressed as a man in a suit and tie.

Her accident, and the terrible pain that was from then on a permanent feature of her life, did not restrain her. In some ways it made her wilder and more uninhibited. And at another level, it gave her the central theme of so much of her painting. For much of it is about pain, and the terrible fragility of the body compared with the resolution of the mind. *My Birth* deals most explicitly with the paradoxical birth into pain and disability. In *The Two Fridas* the white virginal Frida and her alter ego are attached by fragile vessels which are easily cut - hence the bloodstained scissors resting on the white dress. In the two *Self Portraits* of 1940, the flowers in her hair and the lush landscape behind seem inaccessible because of the thorny brambles around her neck. Here, as elsewhere, the physical constraints - the iron corsets, the lines to machines - tie her and limit her as in the 1932 *Henry Ford Hospital*. But the most powerful of all these representations of the hurt she constantly feels is her 1943 *Broken Column*, the portrait of a woman literally torn apart by her own anguish.

And there are other sources of pain and distress too-though not necessarily physical. The canvas *Unos Cuantos Piquetitos* (A Few Little Nips)

may have referred to a famous murder case of its time, but it is also a portrait of jealousy and the terrible damage it wreaks. Her various portraits of Diego and herself may often portray him as childlike and dependent - which he often was; but at the same time he was wilful and promiscuous, and his fits of jealousy over Frida's lovers did nothing to inhibit his own pursuit of women.

Kahlo and Rivera met in the mid-1920s and married in 1929. Their attraction was clearly sexual - and Frida was uninhibited and daring in her explorations of her own sexuality. But they were also political comrades - at this time Frida abandoned her colourful folk dresses in favour of the dark clothes of a Communist militant.

In 1931 Diego went to the US to paint murals in San Francisco and the ill-fated Rockefeller murals in Chicago (destroyed by a Rockefeller who did not like being portrayed side by side with Lenin!). While Frida might have appeared, with her beautiful traditional dresses and her tiny broken body, like the 'perfect doll' that one writer described her as, she won recognition in her own right, and pursued desire and sexual fulfilment with a range of transient lovers. Back in Mexico, Frida is as prominent in the Communist Party demonstrations and among the contingents of the Revolutionary Artists Union as Diego. Divorced in 1939, they remarried a year later - despite everything, though their final divorce came ten years later.

A ribbon around a bombshell

The great Andr  Breton, the man who defined Surrealism and embodied it, described Frida Kahlo's work as 'a ribbon around a bombshell'. Surrealism explored the hidden parts of consciousness, the bizarre and unexpected encounters between layers of experience, the unbidden possibilities in human understanding. In the sense that it affirmed the enormous potentiality of human beings, once it has been freed from constraint, Surrealism was revolutionary.

In those terms, it was obvious why Breton - who loved Mexico and was a close friend of both Rivera and Trotsky - was so excited by Kahlo. Her paintings were in one way narratives of terrible suffering and restraint, made all the worse by the sadness, distress and sense of betrayal that seemed to be the permanent consequence of life with Rivera: 'I have had two accidents in my life - the streetcar crash and

Diego Rivera.' And yet her often violent and disturbing paintings are in themselves affirmations of life; there is beauty in them, not in the qualities of conventional portraiture but in the power and strength of the painting itself.

Like her Diary, full of curses and imprecations interwoven with lyrical images and fragments of poetry, her paintings defy fatalism with their colours, their endlessly surprising meetings of image and meaning, their powerful assertions of woman. And then there is her life, full of hurt and pain and yet equally bursting with life, defiance, rebellion - as Carlos Fuentes says, 'by belly laughs and four letter words'.

Forgotten for many years, or lost in Diego Rivera's enormous shadow, it seems appropriate that Frida should have been rediscovered by the women's movement - coinciding with Madonna's purchase of one of her paintings for over 2 million dollars. But she is not a woman's painter (though she is a woman) or a feminist (though she fought long and hard for her own liberation from physical limitations and social restraints). She is a painter whose art itself is an act of defiance, a challenge, an affirmation of life - a 'bomb in velvet ribbons'.

'Frida Kahlo' will be at the Tate Modern from 9 June. Mike Gonzalez will be doing a guided tour of the exhibition after the final rally at Marxism on 11 July.

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Contents

[Complete list for this issue](#)