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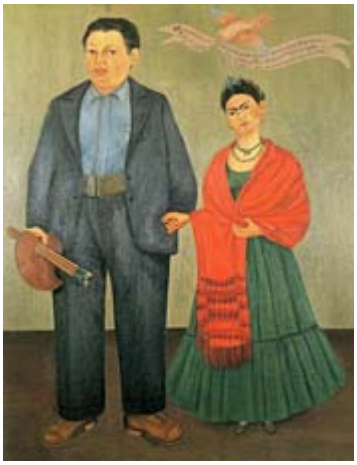
Frida Kahlo
The Two Fridas
1939
Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City

Frida Kahlo
Self-Portrait
1926
Private collection



Frida Kahlo
Frida and Diego Rivera
1931
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

TWO FRIDAS
by Ben Davis

There seem to be two Frida Kahlos -- and not just the two Frida Kahlos in *The Two Fridas*, the famous 1939 painting on view currently at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in "Frida Kahlo." That touring show, launched to coincide with the centenary of the artist's birth in 2007, features some 41 paintings, as well as a generous selection of photos of the woman and the famous people who surrounded her.

On the one hand, there's the mythical, beloved Frida Kahlo, a visionary artist whose work has become the subject of intense popular identification -- a fellow critic recently recounted the story of encountering a kind of hippie cult that literally claims to pray to Frida. To quote a tagline from a documentary on the DVD for the recent Salma Hayek movie, in this take, Frida Kahlo is an "extraordinary woman, who turned her love and pain into art." The complex, historical artist vanishes beneath the legend: Fans love her as a liberated, pansexual goddess figure, but ignore the radically codependent aspect of her relationship with Diego Rivera; they celebrate her radical politics, but free themselves of the burden of having to take stock of her fervent adoration of Stalin and Mao.

At the same time, this very popularity has inspired not a little critical backlash, particularly from pundits who seem to feel that Kahlo is the undeserved recipient of critical affirmative action, and paint a picture of her as a minor artist who has somehow scammed her way into the cannon -- that's Frida #2. Writing recently in the *New York Review of Books* about the Philadelphia incarnation of the current show, Sanford Schwartz embarrasses himself by claiming that when you set the hype aside, Kahlo is a less "powerful painter" than Marsden Hartley (ouch), dismissing her as merely a "regional or provincial artist" -- as if her vast international influence is simply a mistake. (André Breton, for one, disagreed, writing the catalogue essay for Kahlo's solo show at Julien Levy gallery in New York in 1938 and shepherding her into the salons of Paris.)

So, how do you make sense of Frida Kahlo? To start with, much that is wrongly thought about her art stems from a misunderstanding of its motor force. A good place to start is the artificial opposition often set up between Kahlo and her legendary husband. You know the drill: Diego Rivera was a public figure, a political activist, the most famous Mexican artist of his day, lauded for giant, didactic murals; Kahlo existed permanently in his shadow, and created intimate portraits in her own private Surrealist language, allegorizing her struggle with her disabilities -- she suffered 32 operations over the course of a short lifetime -- her miscarriages, her obsession with Diego, her pain at his infidelity. He is the masculine, quintessentially public; she, private, soulful, elementally feminine.

This, however, is too schematic by half. Although Frida Kahlo's subject, obsessively, was herself, her painting was never purely self-directed. As a youth, her leg was deformed by polio; she compensated through her intellectual liveliness and student activism at her elite private school. She took up painting while convalescing

Frida Kahlo
A Few Small Nips
1935
Collection of Dolores Olmedo Foundation

Frida Kahlo
Sun and Life
1947
Private collection
Courtesy Galería Arvil

Frida Kahlo
Portrait of Lucha Maria, Girl from Tehuacán or Sun and Moon
1942
Pérez Simón Collection

Frida Kahlo
Self-Portrait on the Border Line

from the devastating street car accident that would haunt the rest of her life. Art was a part of her way of continuing her interaction with the world at a time when she was physically thwarted (her 1926 *Self-Portrait* was made for her then-boyfriend, Alejandro Gomez Arias; she instructed him to hang it at eye-level so that she could have a virtual presence in his life). According to both Diego and Frida, the first question she asked him on showing her paintings was not, "Am I any good?" but "Am I good enough to make money doing this?" That is, she wanted to craft her image for a larger audience.

After they married in 1929, Rivera's political commitment to creating a popular Mexican art found its counterpoint in her transformation of herself, assuming traditional Mexican dress -- the first time her signature costume appears in her work is in *Frida and Diego Rivera* (1931), a portrait of the married couple. While he worked at his murals, she took to visiting him in costume, delivering picnic baskets decked with embroidered napkins, self-consciously affecting the persona of a Mexican *campesina*, or peasant woman. The details so indelibly catalogued in her self-portraits -- her colorful dresses, her decision not to bleach the hair on her lip or pluck her eyebrows, the adorning flora and fauna that symbolized Mexico's spiritual fertility -- are not just the artist looking in the mirror. They are self-consciously foregrounded signifiers of a political identification with the Mexican common people against the Europeanized elite, as in-your-face in their way as are the images of peasant masses that dominate Diego's mural cycles.

Her physical weakness doomed her to be unable to create the kinds of large-scale public works that Rivera and his fellow Muralists deemed to be the only proper political art -- though she would encourage her students in this direction, rather than asking them to emulate her own practice. Nevertheless, her work was no less engaged in the problem of popular art. Self-taught, she transcended her early flirtation with Botticelli (the *Venus* still recurs throughout her oeuvre) in the same way that Rivera transcended his love of Uccello. She aggressively synthesized popular Mexican forms, and the "magical" symbolism of her work owes much to its citation of Mexican devotional art. The primitivism of many of her canvases, as in *A Few Small Nips* (1935), with its compressed, flattened space depicting a man having just stabbed his wife to death, is a deliberate pastiche of folk art (Pablo Picasso told Rivera once that Frida could paint a face better than either of them). She loved Pre-Columbian art -- the couple amassed a stupendous collection -- and told her students that it was the true wellspring for modern art. The symbols of Aztec culture -- the stepped pyramids, the sun and the moon, stone masks, images of indigenous people -- recur frequently.

It is true, of course, that her paintings have much that is of private significance. But a brief look at her diary indicates that even her most intimate moments were shot through with political self-mythification. Famously, she gave out her birth date as 1910, so that her birth would coincide with the Mexican Revolution. There is little doubt that she identified her own personal pain with Mexico, permanently thwarted and oppressed by its neighbor to the north. Distinguishing herself from the Surrealists, Kahlo said, "I never paint dreams or nightmares. I paint my own reality." Another variation on this, from her diary, linking her art to Diego's: "what is most important is the nonillusion."

It is true that Kahlo and Rivera's political commitments were often contradictory, and seem to be inflected with a self-serving naiveté. They could accept the patronage of U.S. tycoons (Nelson Rockefeller, of course, was appalled when Rivera tried to give him a portrait of Lenin; Frida's excruciatingly personal *My Birth* went to department store baron Edgar Kaufmann) and honeymoon in the villa of Dwight W. Morrow, U.S. ambassador to Mexico, even as their art was

Between Mexico and the United States
1932
Collection Maria Rodriguez de Reyero

Frida Kahlo
Moses
1945
Private collection

Frida Kahlo
What the Water Gave Me
1938
Isadore Ducasse Fine Arts

Frida Kahlo
Portrait of Diego Rivera
1937
Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection of Modern and Contemporary Mexican Art

expressly preoccupied in a project of casting off baleful Anglo influence, and they were affiliated with the Mexican Communist Party.

When, in 1929, these contradictions became too much, here is how Rivera excommunicated himself from the Party: "I, Diego Rivera, general secretary of the Mexican Communist party, accuse the painter Diego Rivera of collaborating with the petit-bourgeois government of Mexico and of having accepted a commission to paint the stairway of the National Palace of Mexico. This contradicts the politics of the Comintern and therefore the painter Diego Rivera should be expelled from the Communist party by the general secretary of the Communist party, Diego Rivera." Frida followed him out. Which is to say that Kahlo's frequent motif of a self divided is not simply her personal mental invention. A few years later, she would paint *Self-Portrait on the Border Line between Mexico and the United States* (1932), a self-consciously naïf image of herself in peasant dress, literally straddling a border with the Stars-and-Stripes floating in a belching cloud of factory smoke on her right and the ruins and fecund flora of the mythical Mexico on her left.

The couple's political contradictions, however, have a very simple root. Rivera owed his status within the Communist Party in the first place to the force of his personality. Kahlo and Rivera believed deeply in the liberation of Mexican workers and peasants, but the vehicle they identified for this liberation was, above all, the power of great individuals to overcome society's contradictions, to remake reality (it was up to artists to lead the revolution, Rivera said at the opening of murals by Kahlo's students in 1943, making art "so that the people can express their complaints" -- apparently, the people were incapable of speaking for themselves). The politics of the Communist Party at that time were probably congenial to this idea -- by the end of the '20s, the Russian Revolution of 1917, starved by international reaction, was fatally degenerating into a cult of personality around Stalin. Classical Marxist theory had emphasized that socialism was possible only on an international basis, and thus only if the revolution spread, a door that was shut in 1923 with the failure of the German revolution. To justify calling what existed in the USSR "socialism," Stalin had to invent a new mythology of "socialism in one country," which required a belief that brute Marxist rhetoric and the force of personality could triumph over material conditions.

Rivera and Kahlo, of course, played a role in this drama. Following their expulsion from the Mexican Communist Party, Rivera used his celebrity status to help convince the Mexican government to offer sanctuary to Leon Trotsky, the Bolshevik leader who had been exiled from the USSR in 1928, ultimately to be assassinated in Mexico by Stalin for his insistence on the Russian Revolution's degeneration. Kahlo, briefly, took Trotsky as a lover. Yet later, when the couple rejoined the Communist Party in the late '40s, she bitterly slandered Trotsky (she accused him of stealing "fourteen beds, fourteen machine guns and fourteen of everything" from her house). "Since Trotsky came to Mexico I have understood his error," she writes in her diary in 1952, pledging allegiance instead to "Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao Tse."

Trotsky, alone, hunted, could only hold out an improbable dream of rebuilding the socialist movement from scratch, from the bottom up. Kahlo believed in the force of a magnetic personality, and in those days, when the world was locked in the Cold War struggle between Capitalism and Communism, the notion that you needed a powerful, top-down force to identify with, that not taking one side was caving to the other, must have made some sense. It was a conviction that welded her New Agey spiritual beliefs to the authoritarianism of official Communism ("Tao / MAO," she scribbles in her diary). In 1945, she had even painted a picture, *Moses*, which more or less

Frida Kahlo
Self-Portrait
1930
Private Collection

Frida Kahlo
Self-Portrait with Necklace
1933
Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection of Modern and Contemporary Mexican Art

Frida Kahlo
Self-Portrait with Bed [also called *Me and My Doll*]
1937
Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection of Modern and Contemporary Mexican Art

allegorizes the metaphysical necessity of the myth of a strongman to weld the formless masses together -- the small (20 by 27 in.) painting is packed with a mural-like swarm of figures, meant to illustrate Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*. A baby in the womb floats in the center, the Messianic figure. Around this orbit images from art, at the top; a middle layer of heroic portraits of Marx, Ghandi, Alexander the Great, etc.; and at the bottom, a field of teeming crowds waving the flags of various parties, including the Nazis and the Soviet Union. "The main theme is 'MOSES' or the birth of the HERO," she explained. It was a hero she felt she needed.

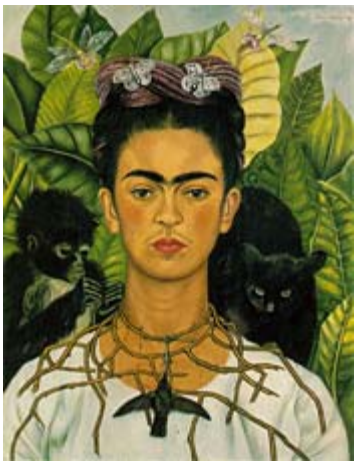
Critics are wrong to say that Kahlo's attachment to Marxism was merely a kind of secularized religious belief, simply a displacement of the spiritual salvation she needed in relation to her own wasted condition by the '50s. Kahlo's diary, certainly, gives some ammunition for such barbs, when she refers to the "revolution" in quasi-metaphysical terms. She became more attached to the struggle the more she personally suffered. And yet, her keen sense of the injustice faced by Latin America was not delusional, even if her faith in Stalinized Communism was misplaced. "Perhaps Frida and Diego grossly overestimated the Communist promise. They did not underestimate the menace of U.S. foreign policy in Latin America," Carlos Fuentes writes. "Such were the parameters of our political life as my generation struggled to find a level of reason and humanity between the Manichean demands of the Cold War and its frozen inhuman warriors." Kahlo's final public appearance was not, as it is mythologized, her 1953 solo exhibition in Mexico City, when she was carried to the gallery on a four-poster bed. It was at a protest against the C.I.A.-engineered overthrow of Jacobo Arbenz Guzman in Guatemala in 1954.

This long detour through Kahlo's political life is important because it helps explain something about the work. The Surrealist flavor is obvious, and has been sufficiently valorized in her popular representation. The other, less obvious presence, however, is Socialist Realism. Kahlo's work is above all an innovative admixture of the two. For every *What the Water Gave Me* (1938) -- by consensus, her most "Surreal" painting, depicting a Boschian swarm of memories floating in a bathtub between her legs -- there is a *Portrait of Diego Rivera* (1937), a sober, soulful tribute to her husband in the style familiar from socialist hagiography ("Viva Stalin! Viva Diego!" she writes in her diary).

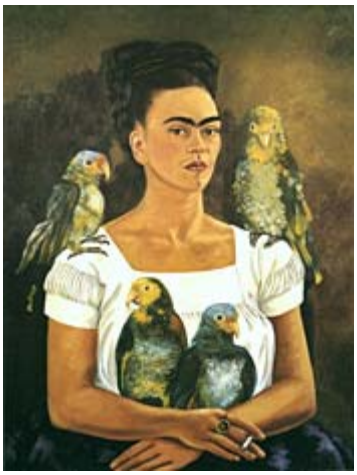
She was, quintessentially, a painter of burning self-portraits. Where else do you see obsessively repeated portraits, the reiteration of the self, transformed into a myth? In the posthumous cult of Lenin, in the cults of Stalin and Mao, that's where. These images of the self-made-monumental echo the language Frida invented for herself because she too sought to portray herself as a larger-than-life icon of her country, obsessively binding those around her to herself. Predictably, the SFMoMA show does not showcase her crudely painted late-period "political" paintings, but a glance at a work like *Frida and Stalin* (1954) shows that, even if Kahlo herself believed that she was making a break from the decadence of her earlier work, a subcutaneous thread connects them.

This, finally, brings us back to the two "takes" on Frida Kahlo that we began with. Her popularity today is, as is often noted, a posthumous product of the social upheavals of the '60s and '70s. It is a construct of the same era that gave us the myth that Emma Goldman said "If I can't dance I don't want your revolution" (this was in fact a T-shirt slogan from the '70s; what Goldman actually said was more complex), when there was a searching around for idols to project contemporary attitudes onto. And yet, Kahlo's "rediscovery" cannot be understood without understanding that she was from the

Frida Kahlo
Itzcuintli Dog with Me
ca. 1938
Private Collection



Frida Kahlo
Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird
1940
Nickolas Muray Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin



Frida Kahlo
Me and My Parrots
1941
Private collection

beginning self-consciously involved in creating her art as a space in which to build a myth of herself.

Admirers identify with her, powerfully, passionately, politically. Her art was involved in manufacturing a powerful, passionate, political myth. Finally, the two ways of looking at Frida Kahlo represent two angles of vision on the same image; both must be corrected slightly to bring the truth into focus. That is, you have to look past the mythical Frida. But you also have to recognize that Frida's personality cult is not accidental, but part of her work's esthetic make-up, and her achievement. Otherwise, you are looking at her cross-eyed. You cannot return her fierce gaze.

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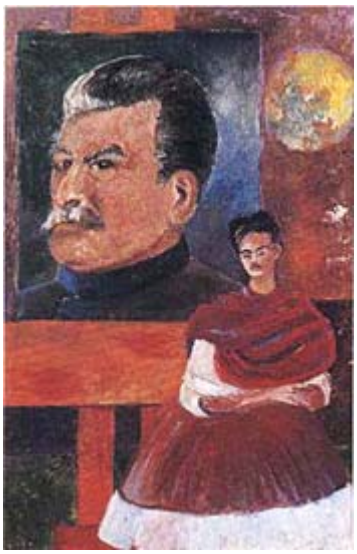
Frida Kahlo
Self-Portrait with Monkeys
1943
Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection of Modern and Contemporary Mexican Art

Frida Kahlo
Self-Portrait with Small Monkey
1945
Museo Dolores Olmedo



Frida Kahlo
Frida and Stalin
1954
Museo Frida Kahlo

Photographer unknown
Frida on a boat, Xochimilco, Mexico City
n.d.
Vicente Wolf Photography Collection