

lery in New York, Breton regards Kahlo's art as situated at the crossroads between two tendencies in modern art, the political and the pictorial.]

There is a country where the world's heart opens out, relieved of the oppressive feeling that nature everywhere is drab and unenterprising, that, despite racial particularities, the human being is made in a mould and condemned to achieve only what modern society's all-embracing economic laws permit him; where creation has been prodigal with undulations of the ground and species of plant-life, and has surpassed itself with its range of seasons and cloud architectures; where, for a whole century now, the word INDEPENDENCE has continued to crackle beneath a blacksmith's giant bellows, sending up incomparable sparks into the sky. I had long been impatient to go there, to put to the test the idea I had formulated of the kind of art which our own era demanded, an art that would deliberately sacrifice the external model to the internal model, that would resolutely give perception precedence over representation.

Would this idea be powerful enough to stand up to Mexico's mental climate? The eyes of all the children of Europe, among them the eyes of the child I once was, had preceded me there with their countless enchanting flashes of fire. Now, with the same eyes that I used to cast over imaginary sites, I was able to see the prodigious sierra racing across my view with the speed of a galloping horse and breaking into foam against the shore-line of the golden palm-groves; I was able to see the specific silhouette of the adventurer, brother of the poet, outlined at a greater height and more imperiously than anywhere else, laden with heavy ornaments of felt, metal and leather. And yet, although these fragmentary images plucked from the treasure-chest of childhood continued to exercise a magical power, they nevertheless left me conscious of certain gaps. I had never heard the immemorial songs of the Zapotec musicians; my eyes remained closed to the perfect nobility and terrible poverty of the Indian people as exemplified by their image in the sun-drenched market-places; I never imagined that the world of fruits could encompass such a marvel as the *pitahaya*, whose coiled pulp is the colour of rose petals, whose skin is grey, and which tastes like a kiss blended of love and desire; I had never held in my hand a lump of that red earth from which had emerged the statuettes of Colima which are half-woman, half-swan, their make-up already beautifully applied by nature; and, lastly, I had not yet set eyes on Frida Kahlo de Rivera, resembling these statuettes in her bearing and adorned, too, like a fairy-tale princess, with magic spells at her fingertips, an apparition in the flash of light of the *quetzal* bird which scatters opals among the rocks as it flies away.

She was there on that twentieth day of April 1938, framed by one of the two cubes (the pink one or the blue one? I shall never remember) of her transparent house. The garden bristles with idols and the tousled white mops of cactuses, and is enclosed simply by a border of giant green cactuses: through the narrow gaps between them peep, from morning to night, the eyes of the curious who have flocked here from all over America, and the lenses of their cameras, hoping immediately on their arrival to catch revolutionary thought, like an eagle, in its nest. Their opti-

mism arises from the belief that Diego Rivera can be seen every day, either passing from room to room, or strolling through the garden, pausing occasionally to stroke his spider-monkeys, or on the veranda where a staircase without a hand-rail thrusts up into space, and they hope to catch a glimpse of his superb presence, to witness the slow, measured stride, the physical and moral stature of a great fighter. He incarnates, of course, in the eyes of an entire continent, the battle that is being waged so brilliantly against all the forces of reaction and coercion, and so he symbolizes for me, too, everything that is most valid in this world. Yet at the same time, there is nothing more human than the way in which he has attuned himself gently to his wife's ideas and way of life, and nothing more impressive than the strength that he evidently derives from Frida's enchanting personality.

I have for long admired the self-portrait by Frida Kahlo de Rivera that hangs on a wall of Trotsky's study. She has painted herself dressed in a robe of wings gilded with butterflies, and it is exactly in this guise that she draws aside the mental curtain. We are privileged to be present, as in the most glorious days of German romanticism, at the entry of a young woman endowed with all the gifts of seduction, one accustomed to the society of men of genius. One can expect such a mind to be fashioned according to geometrical principles, ideally adapted to provide the vital solution for a series of conflicts of the kind that affected Bettina Brentano and Caroline Schlegel in their time. Frida Kahlo de Rivera is delicately situated at that point of intersection between the political (philosophical) line and the artistic line, beyond which *we hope that they may unite in a single revolutionary consciousness while still preserving intact the identities of the separate motivating forces that run through them*. Since this solution is being sought here on the plane of plastic expression, Frida Kahlo's contribution to the art of our epoch is destined to assume a quite special value as providing the casting vote between the various pictorial tendencies.

My surprise and joy was unbounded when I discovered, on my arrival in Mexico, that her work has blossomed forth, in her latest paintings, into pure surreality, despite the fact that it had been conceived without any prior knowledge whatsoever of the ideas motivating the activities of my friends and myself. Yet, at this present point in the development of Mexican painting, which since the beginning of the nineteenth century has remained largely free from foreign influence and profoundly attached to its own resources, I was witnessing here, at the other end of the earth, a spontaneous outpouring of our own questioning spirit: what irrational laws do we obey, what subjective signals allow us to establish the right direction at any moment, which symbols and myths predominate in a particular conjunction of objects or web of happenings, what meaning can be ascribed to the eye's capacity to pass from visual power to visionary power? The painting which Frida Kahlo de Rivera was just completing at that moment—*What the Water Yields Me*—illustrated, unbeknown to her, the phrase I had once heard from the lips of Nadja: 'I am the thought of bathing in the mirrorless room.'

This art even contains that drop of cruelty and humour uniquely capable of blending the rare affective powers that compound together to form the philtre which is Mexico's secret. The power of inspiration here is nourished by the strange ecstasies of puberty and the mysteries of generation, and, far from considering these to be the mind's private preserves, as in some colder climates, she displays them proudly with a mixture of candour and insolence.

While I was in Mexico, I felt bound to say that I could think of no art more perfectly *situated* in time and space than hers. I would like to add now that there is no art more exclusively feminine, in the sense that, in order to be as seductive as possible, it is only too willing to play alternately at being absolutely pure and absolutely pernicious.

The art of Frida Kahlo is a ribbon around a bomb. (pp. 141-44)

André Breton, "Frida Kahlo De Rivera," in *his Surrealism and Painting*, translated by Simon Watson Taylor, Harper & Row, Publishers, 1972, pp. 141-44.

ARTnews (essay date 1938)

[In the following exhibition review, the critic characterizes Kahlo as an accomplished modern artist.]

The exhibition of Frida Kahlo (Frida Rivera) at the Julien Levy Gallery gives us the art of a woman, a Mexican and a modern. Thoughts such as those offered here as to birth, giving the breast, and feminine or masculine attraction could not have come from a man. Again no land other than the one that enriched the world with the great ancient sculptures, with the marvels of decoration, and the broad-spoken, and genuinely popular art of Mexico could have inspired a picture like *The Square is Theirs*, where a child six years old, perhaps, looks up at the Judas who will be exploded with fireworks, at the pregnant woman derived from Tarascan clay figures, and at the triumphant but pleasing skeleton, with its whiteness like that of a rare porcelain. So, with this allusion to the color sense of the artist, we are led to recall that these are works of art we are seeing. And they are rightly to be called modern.

Passing by the abstractions of the War years as definitely as she does the purposeless counterfeit of nature that flourished in the time before the War, this painter, who did not know the word surrealist till told that she was one, is poignantly of her time. She must be, since her experience is her own, as it is—and unmistakably. Hence the remarkable craftsmanship: it does not fumble or hesitate because she knows so well the things she tells of; and feeling strongly about them, speaking of them with the openness that comes of conviction, her work goes beyond the trial stage of a young artist's first show; it is, definitively, a beautiful achievement.

W. P., "Frida Rivera: Gifted Canvases by an Unselfconscious Surrealist," in *ARTnews*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 7, November 12, 1938, p. 13.

Hayden Herrera (essay date 1979)

[The author of two books on Kahlo, Herrera is credited with reviving the artist's reputation. In the following essay, the critic examines the influence of traditional Mexican art on the style and themes of Kahlo's paintings.]

Of all the many artists who, in postrevolutionary Mexico sought to make Mexican art emphatically Mexican, none was more passionate in identifying with her native roots than Frida Kahlo (1910-1954). The ethic of "Mexicanidad" (Mexicanness) pervaded her existence on many levels; it was a style, a politics and a psychological support. It expressed itself in her behavior, her appearance, in the decoration of her home and in her art. The peculiar intensity of Frida Kahlo's love for indigenous Mexican culture comes from the way it was linked with the urgencies and occurrences of her life.

Frida Kahlo was born in Coyoacán at a time when the little town had not yet been absorbed into Mexico City. Her mother was a Mexican of mixed Indian and Spanish descent. Her father was a German Jewish immigrant to Mexico who became a photographer specializing in recording monuments of Colonial architecture. Having a foreign father, one who focused his art on Mexican artifacts, may well have made Frida Kahlo all the more aware of the beauty and richness of her country's indigenous art, and it may have intensified her need to stress the Indian aspect of her heritage.

The event in Frida Kahlo's life that caused her to become a painter—and that largely determined the content of her work—was a terrible bus accident at the age of fifteen. It left her a partial invalid for life, unable to bear children and, despite some twenty-five surgical operations, it eventually led to her death. Kahlo taught herself to paint while recuperating in bed. When she was well enough to walk she took her paintings to show to Diego Rivera, the great muralist whom, years before, she had watched paint a mural in the amphitheatre of her school. Rivera encouraged the teenage girl to keep on painting. They became friends, then lovers, then in August 1929, man and wife.

The change in Frida Kahlo after she married Diego Rivera is remarkable. She began to dress in the long flowing costumes of the Tehuantepec region, partly to hide her injured leg, partly because she knew the costumes were exotically beautiful, and partly to please her husband who felt that Mexican women should wear Mexican-style clothes. They were made, Rivera decreed, "by people, for people"; moreover, he said, wearing European clothes was a sign of cultural colonialism. Such dicta changed Kahlo's painting along similar lines. Instead of painting highly stylized, elegant portraits of her bourgeois friends in European dress, she began to paint portraits and self-portraits of Mexican-looking people dressed in poor or native clothes.

And the way she depicted them in broad, simplified areas of strong color was very like the way Rivera painted figures in his canvases and murals. Rivera himself had come to this simplified style by overlaying his knowledge of European modernism with a thorough absorption of the values of Mexican popular and pre-Columbian art, both of