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The passion and the politics of Frida Kahlo

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Megan Trudell reviews a new exhibition of works by the celebrated Mexican artist

Frida Kahlo is an icon who is arguably more famous for her image than for her work. Her paintings sell for millions—celebrity fans include Madonna and Salma Hayek. She is hailed as a feminist artist, a deeply personal painter of women’s experience.

It is not hard to see why. She was an independent woman who endured great physical pain as a result of a horrific accident and traumatic emotional betrayals. For years she and her work were overshadowed by her relationship with Mexican artist Diego Rivera—yet she has emerged as a celebrated artist in her own right.

There is much in Kahlo’s work that articulates and rages at oppression, often graphically portraying her own considerable physical and emotional trauma.

In Henry Ford Hospital, painted after a near fatal miscarriage, is a powerful and painful “anti-nativity scene” laden with symbolism. A bleeding Kahlo lies in her hospital bed tied to objects including the foetus she lost, a pelvic bone and an orchid.

Her painted tears evoke a symbol from Mexico’s folk culture—La Llorona. This weeping, adulterous woman who killed her children represents the supposed dangers of uncontrolled female sexuality and childlessness.

However, as Emma Dexter, one of the exhibition’s curators, argues, the notion of Kahlo as an artist chiefly concerned with women’s experience misses her work’s “fully rounded political power and ambition”. This exhibition aims to redress the balance—and it succeeds marvellously. It shows how Kahlo’s work was politicised and shaped by her world.



Kahlo’s The Two Fridas shows herself split into two parts — one in European dress, another in native Indian dress (Pic: HSBC/Mexico Tourist Board)

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The Mexican revolution of 1910 had overthrown a hated dictatorship, but the peasant forces led by Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa were defeated after protracted fighting. These years tragically saw peasants and workers pitted against each other. The conservative forces of Venustiano Carranza eventually triumphed.

The rhetoric of populism and a return to indigenous traditions were used to forge a sense of national identity, while Mexico's rulers colluded in maintaining its colonial status and impoverishing its people.

Born three years before the revolution, Kahlo was deeply committed to its ideals, and her work is imprinted with its hopes and disappointments. She was inspired to join the Communist Party and later became a Trotskyist.

There are over 70 drawings and paintings in the exhibition, which trace Kahlo's development from overt political imagery in the early 1930s, through the famous self portraits, to mysticism at the end of her life.

Her style changes from early imitations of European painting to the more recognisable style of popular Mexican naive painting—itself a political move. She created her own secular and unflinching versions of religious “ex votos”—images of gratitude to saints painted on tin—subverting the still powerful church.

Early subject matter includes a self portrait with a revolutionary fighter, and drawings that depict the conservative Carranza as the symbol of the corruption of 1930s Mexico.

My Dress Hangs There counterposes an idealised national identity in the shape of a traditional Mexican dress to the empty commercial values of the US.

A toilet and a trophy stand on pedestals, a church is decorated with stained glass in the shape of a dollar sign, while demonstrators swarm at the bottom.

Kahlo's self portraits from the late 1930s correspond, the curators argue, with the ebbing of revolutionary energy in Mexico and the assertion of capitalist individualism.

Clearly a turn inwards from wider political themes, they are proud, often poignant, illustrations of personal independence and self possession. They are also arrestingly beautiful, vividly coloured and richly textured.

Taken together, Kahlo's work represents what one writer describes as a “radiant yet troubling afterglow of the highest ideals of the Mexican revolution”. The complex weaving together of mythology and symbolism, political and religious allegory, can be difficult for audiences unfamiliar with her material.

But by putting her work in context and including many lesser known pieces, this exhibition offers a rare chance to look beneath the hype. We can judge Kahlo's work for its vigour and energy, its beauty and expression, against the rhythms of profound social and cultural upheaval.

Frida Kahlo's work is at the Tate Modern in London until 9 October.
Go to www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/kahlo

The National Portrait Gallery is also showing some fascinating photographs of Kahlo until 23 June. Go to www.npg.org.uk/live/wokahlo.asp

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