

FRIDA KAHLO:
Her Life and Art Revisited

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- FRIDA KAHLO, MYSTERIOUS PAINTER.* By Nancy Frazier. The Library of Famous Women. (Woodbridge, Conn.: Blackbirch, 1992. Pp. 64. \$14.95 cloth.)
- FRIDA KAHLO, MEXICAN PAINTER.* By Hedda Garza. Hispanics of Achievement Series. (New York: Chelsea House, 1994. Pp. 125. \$18.95 cloth, \$7.95 paper.)
- THE ARTS: FRIDA KAHLO.* By Jane Anderson Jones. (Vero Beach, Fla.: Rourke, 1993. Pp. 112. \$19.95 cloth, \$14.95 paper.)
- FRIDA KAHLO.* By Malka Drucker. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995. Pp. 176. \$12.95 paper.)
- FRIDA KAHLO IN MEXICO.* By Robin Richmond. Painters and Places Series. (San Francisco: Pomegranate Artbooks, 1994. Pp. 157. \$29.95 cloth.)
- FRIDA KAHLO: AN OPEN LIFE.* By Raquel Tibol. Translated by Elinor Randall. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993. Pp. 230. \$19.95 cloth.)
- RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION AND THE BODY: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS.* By Paula M. Coe. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. Pp. 184. \$26.00 cloth.)
- FRIDA KAHLO.* By Sarah M. Lowe. Universe Series on Women Artists. (New York: Universe, 1991. Pp. 128. \$13.95 paper.)
- LATIN AMERICAN WOMEN ARTISTS, KAHLO, AND LOOK WHO ELSE: A SELECTIVE ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY.* By Cecilia Puerto. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996. Pp. 237. \$69.50 cloth.)

...976 LOCA

Call me what you will or won't
but from where I'm standing I can see
a whole army of Frida vendidas
stranded alongside Wilshire Boulevard
trying to look more Mexxican than me
you know, if you really love Frida
you'll let your mustache grow baby
I can see it now.

ARTISTAS CHICANAS UNIDAS FEM-
ENINAS Y CON BIGOTE
Let your mustache grow baby

in a show of support for Frida
ay como sufrió nuestra Frida
Idola, genia, compañera. . . .
Marisela Norte, "976 Loca"¹

Only twenty-some years ago, feminist art critic Gloria Orenstein lamented,

It is significant that there does *not* exist a single monographic study of her [Kahlo's] complete works to date. Her museum is a sanctuary and a monument that bears testimony to her life and to her art. Yet, somehow she has been written out of Art History. Her fame is legendary, but her artistic reputation is not commensurate with her stature and her importance. . . . If the retrospective of her work in Mexico is to have any real impact on the art world today, it must bring about a miracle—the resurrection of the image of Frida Kahlo as one of the most important artists of our time.²

The now exceptionally famous Frida Kahlo could have had little idea that her life and her art would have attracted such phenomenal attention from artists, scholars, collectors, the popular press, and even disbelievers. As of 1996, more than 135 books, exhibition catalogues, chapters in books, scholarly essays, popular magazine articles, and newspaper stories have been written about her, not to mention a number of master's theses and doctoral dissertations.³ Only a handful of these items were published during her lifetime or shortly after her death in 1954, however. Most have appeared in the last twenty years. In addition, at least five films have been made about her life, three of which are available on video.⁴

A 1990 article in *The New York Times* characterized Frida as "a Hispanic woman, bisexual, an invalid and an artist—all the qualifications for a cult figure. Even Madonna is a fan."⁵ Kahlo has indeed been

1. Marisela Norte, "976 LOCA," in *Recent Chicano Poetry/Neueste Chicano-Lyrik*, edited by Heiner Bus and Ana Castillo (Bamberg, Germany: Universitätsbibliothek Bamberg, 1974), 16–17. This sharp but often humorous poem exemplifies how Frida is incorporated into an ironic exploration of culture and identity.

2. Gloria Orenstein, "Frida Kahlo: Painting for Miracles," *Feminist Art Journal* 2, no. 3 (Fall 1973):7–9.

3. These figures are taken from Cecilia Puerto's bibliography under review here. See also Rupert García, *Frida Kahlo: A Bibliography* (Berkeley: Chicano Studies Library Publications Unit, University of California, 1983). Although published thirteen years ago, García's bibliography remains a major resource, with 181 entries citing virtually every article (in Spanish and English) in which Kahlo was even mentioned, from those written during her life until 1983.

4. Jones provides the following information on these films and videos (p. 108): Karen Crommie and David Crommie, *The Life and Death of Frida Kahlo as Told to David and Karen Crommie*, documentary film, 1976; Paul Leduc, *Frida*, film available on video, 1984; Louise Lo, *Frida Kahlo: Portrait of an Artist*, documentary film, made for the Public Broadcasting Service by KQED in San Francisco, 1988; Ken Mandel, Jeff Jurst, and Cora Cardona, *Frida Kahlo: A Ribbon around a Bomb*, film, 1992; and RM Arts, Hershon Guerra, and WDR, *Frida Kahlo: Portrait of an Artist*, video, 1983.

5. See Hayden Herrera, "Why Frida Kahlo Speaks to the 90's," *The New York Times*, 28 Oct. 1990, art section, pp. 1, 41. The actual quote is a highlighted statement provided by the editor of the art section.

fetishized and commodified: self-portraits and photographs stare out from T-shirts, calendars, and jewelry, and her style has been celebrated in fashion features in *Vogue* (February 1990) and *Elle* (May 1989). In September 1995, *Vanity Fair* published a lengthy article by Amy Fine Collins entitled “Diary of a Mad Artist,” in anticipation of the release of Harry Abrams’s publication of Kahlo’s diary.⁶ This article presented Frida as even more highly disturbed than previously thought, a view that might be interpreted as a backlash to her enormous cult status, one comparable with other deceased figures revered in popular culture, such as Elvis Presley, Jim Morrison, James Dean, and Marilyn Monroe.⁷

This essay will review several recent books that focus either entirely or in part on Frida’s life (1907–1954) and to varying extents on the interpretation of her work and its significance. One book in the group is an annotated bibliography of Latin American women artists compiled by Cecilia Puerto. These books are intended for a variety of audiences ranging from juvenile readers and the general public to artists and scholars in art history, philosophy and religion, women’s studies, and cultural studies. All of them signal the ongoing fascination with this twentieth-century artist.

Frida Kahlo has come to represent a host of often contradictory qualities and behaviors: strength and resilience in the face of tragedy and continuous physical and psychic pain; a strong political consciousness active in her daily life and paintings; devotion to her country’s many pasts, which she brought into the present; her own *mestizaje* and bisexuality; Frida’s passionate and difficult relationship with her husband, famous Mexican muralist Diego Rivera; her ebullient and charismatic presence; her adamant atheism combined with her desacralized use of religious imagery and symbolism; creation of herself as a work of Mexican art; profound sadness and despair combined with a sharp wit and a bawdy sense of humor; and a creative imagination and keen intelligence that produced a singular and highly complex body of work that resists simplistic readings. What scholars are realizing is that Kahlo’s paintings—whether

6. *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait*, introduction by Carlos Fuentes, essay by Sarah M. Lowe (New York: Harry N. Abrams; and Mexico City: La Vaca Independiente, 1995).

7. Amy Fine Collins, “Diary of a Mad Artist,” *Vanity Fair*, Sept. 1995, pp. 176–88, 227–30. Collins quotes liberally from a manuscript by Dr. Saloman Grimberg, child psychiatrist and longtime Kahlo scholar and curator. From his access to clinical interviews and other documents as well as his exhaustive examination of Frida’s biography and paintings, Grimberg prepared a psychiatric profile of Kahlo that is devastating. The tone of the article is also indicated by the highlighted blurb at the beginning of the article: “Forty years after her death, Frida Kahlo has become a politically correct heroine for every wounded minority. . . . Amy Fine Collins delves into the artist’s tortured mind” (p. 176). The article clearly attempts to deflate the Kahlo phenomenon and cast aspersions on those who find her persona and her work significant. Much of what Collins writes has merit but is rendered suspect by the smirking tone. Such an effort sidesteps the potent impact of Kahlo’s artwork as a legitimate object of study on a multitude of levels that should never be reduced to simply an exegesis of her illnesses or her marginality. Not even Grimberg goes that far in his many articles.

the self-portraits for which she is best known, the still lifes she executed, or works depicting events and persons meaningful to her—are located at the constantly shifting dualistic intersections of the personal and the political, the historical and the cultural, the mythological and the ideological, the sexual and the spiritual, the traditional and the avant-garde, the defiant and the resigned, male and female, pleasure and pain, life and death. Frida worked continually to create herself in her daily life and through her art, without reducing her identities to either romantic stereotypes or simple pleas for understanding. She made her own body the site for her explorations at a time when the forms and parameters of picturing women and image making by women were codified and circumscribed.

Frida's art is almost entirely centered on a depiction of the self, either literally or metaphorically, and is closely connected (at least on the surface) to the narrative of her life. As a result, psychological interpretations from the most reductive to the most sophisticated have predominated in the past twenty years. Other major approaches have included feminist analyses by U.S. and British writers and a grounding of her life and work in the political, historical, and cultural milieus of which she was a part (a practice begun by Chicano artists and Mexican scholars and curators during the mid-1970s). Some scholars have combined elements of all these avenues. Kahlo has been as equally important as an inspiration and role model for artists—particularly Chicanos, Latinos, feminists, gay and lesbian artists, and more recently a younger generation of Mexican artists. By now the story of her rediscovery and institutionalization as one of the most important artists (not a universal assessment) and popular icons has become almost as significant a topic for discussion and analysis as her life and work themselves. Many articles and at least one exhibition have examined the phenomenon of "Fridomania," or the fetishizing and commodifying of her image and story by the art world, Madison Avenue, and popular culture.⁸

Frida's Unique Life Story

Although Frida's story is fairly well known, it is helpful to restate the highlights at the outset before reviewing works about her. Frida Kahlo was born in 1907 in Coyoacán (now a suburb of Mexico City), three years before the Mexican Revolution broke out. Her mother was Matilde Calderón, of mixed Spanish and Indian heritage, and her father Guillermo

8. Hayden Herrera, "Why Frida Kahlo Speaks to the 90's," *New York Times*; Oriana Baddeley, "Her Dress Hangs Here": Defrocking the Kahlo Cult," *The Oxford Art Journal* 14, no. 1 (1991):10–17; Janice Bergman-Carton, "Strike a Pose: The Framing of Madonna and Frida Kahlo," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 35, no. 4 (Winter 1993):440–52; and Judd Tully, "The Kahlo Cult," *Art News* 93, no. 4 (Apr. 1994):126–33. See also the catalogue entitled *Pasión por Frida*, based on an exhibition organized by the Museo Estudio Diego Rivera in Mexico City in 1991–1992 (Mexico City: Museo Estudio Diego Rivera, 1991).

Kahlo, a German-Jewish expatriate of Hungarian descent, originally from Baden Baden. Although later in life Frida emphasized her indigenous ancestry (genetic and cultural), her mixed heritage played a significant role in her continual construction of herself as an individual and as a subject of her own paintings. Frida was the third of four daughters by her parents. Her father had two other daughters from an earlier marriage who were raised in a convent. Frida's mother, a devout Catholic, ran the household. Her epileptic father taught Frida to assist him in his work as a photographer and encouraged her to learn to draw and paint as well as to be athletic.⁹

In 1913 Frida contracted polio, which left her right leg thinner and smaller than her left. This misfortune was the first in a series of illnesses and accidents that scarred her life and depictions of herself in paintings and drawings. In 1922 she entered the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria in Mexico City as one of thirty-five girls in a student body of two thousand boys. Frida was intent on enjoying her newfound freedom and eventually studied medicine. She became part of a small group of like-minded activist students called "Las Cachuchas" (The Caps) who gathered to discuss politics and culture, read books, and carry out pranks. Her first love, Alejandro Gómez Arias, was the leader of this group.

At this time, Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco, Jean Charlot, and others began painting murals at the school. Frida met Rivera briefly while he was working on his mural in the Anfiteatro Bolívar at the Preparatory School, and she fantasized to her friends about having his child. They did not meet again until 1928. Rivera and the other muralists were working under the auspices of José Vasconcelos, then Secretario de Educación, in support of ideals developed during the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920). These early mural cycles represented the initial stages of the Mexican mural renaissance and what became known as the Escuela de México. This nationalist but avant-garde representational art movement encompassed virtually all art forms and encouraged modern art based on ancient and indigenous artistic practices of Mexico, refuting the European abstract avant garde.

The *indigenismo* that emerged during this period was the latest and most systematic appropriation of the imagery of the indigenous past that first began during the late-colonial period. The question remains as to how relevant *indigenismo* was for Frida prior to her marriage to Diego Rivera in 1929. After that time, it became central to her process of self-identification, and she turned into an integral and almost iconic representative of the elements embodied in *indigenismo*. In the 1970s, the complexities of this aspect of her life and art fascinated both artists inspired by her and scholars investigating her paintings.

9. Guillermo Kahlo was commissioned by the Porfirio Díaz government to photograph major colonial architectural monuments for the 1910 centennial of independence from Spain.

On 25 September 1925, Frida Kahlo and Alejandro Gómez Arias were injured in a near fatal bus accident. She sustained multiple fractures of the back, right leg, pelvis, and right foot and was pierced by a metal rail that exited through her vagina. After a considerable stay in the hospital, Frida returned home to convalesce. Scarred psychologically as well as physically, Kahlo had experienced what she later viewed as one of the defining moments of her life. In the remaining three decades of her life, she suffered several miscarriages and therapeutic abortions and endured more than thirty operations on her spine, leg, and foot, ending with amputation of her right leg below the knee in 1953. The early part of her lengthy recuperation involved several body casts and relapses. During this period, Frida began to paint on an easel constructed to fit over her bed. Her mother had a mirror installed on the underside of the canopy so that Frida could see herself to paint. She also painted friends.

In 1928 Frida met Diego Rivera once again, through her friend Tina Modotti, an activist photographer who became a role model for the younger woman. Frida had already joined the Communist Party, although her own nationalist stance differed considerably from the internationalist position of the party. Frida approached Diego when he was painting at the Secretaría de Educación and asked him to evaluate her work and give her an honest assessment as to whether she should continue as an artist. He told her that she definitely had talent and should pursue her painting. Throughout their lives together, Rivera consistently supported and acknowledged the quality and significance of Frida's work. By August of 1929, they were married (Frida was twenty-two, Diego, forty-three). In 1930 they traveled to the United States, where Rivera had received commissions to paint murals in San Francisco, Detroit, and New York. Frida continued to paint, and some of her ground-breaking work was done at this time, including graphic depictions of a miscarriage she had in 1932 and of her disenchantment with the bourgeois, technologically advanced, and culturally deprived United States. These works include *Portrait of Luther Burbank* (1931), *Frida and Diego Rivera* (1931), *Self-Portrait on the Border between the United States and Mexico* (1932), *My Dress Hangs There* (1932), *My Birth* (1932), and *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932).

Frida and Diego returned to Mexico late in 1933, shortly after his mural *Man at the Crossroads* was summarily painted over at Rockefeller Center when he refused to remove an image of Lenin. From this time until her premature death in 1954 at age forty-seven, Kahlo continued to paint, exhibiting her work intermittently in New York, Paris, and Mexico City. Her life with Rivera was tumultuous. They divorced in 1939 but remarried in 1940. Each one took many lovers. Frida became involved with both men and women, a fact alluded to in her artwork. Their life together was spent at the center of progressive political, intellectual, and cultural ferment in Mexico. Their guests included Russian revolutionary

Leon Trotsky and his wife during their Mexican exile; surrealist André Breton and his wife, Jacqueline Lamba; Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein; and U.S. industrialist Nelson Rockefeller. Frida's adoption of pre-Columbian jewelry and indigenous clothing and hairstyles (primarily of the Tehuana) was not unique among their circle of friends, but she developed it into an art form as well as a stance of political resistance and affirmation. Frida became a remarkable presence, whether at home where she painted, entertained, and was endlessly photographed, or out in public. When Frida died in July 1954, her casket was placed in state in the rotunda of the Palacio de Bellas Artes. Mourners at her funeral included members of the arts community, the general public, and many prominent political figures, among them former President Lázaro Cárdenas.

Three Biographies for Young Readers

In the proliferation of writing on Frida Kahlo, one finds several books designed for young readers: *Frida Kahlo, Mysterious Painter* by Nancy Frazier, *Frida Kahlo: Mexican Painter* by Hedda Garza, and *The Arts: Frida Kahlo* by Jane Anderson Jones. The three books belong respectively to three different series devoted to the arts, Hispanic achievement, and famous women. It is encouraging to have such series available and to find Frida Kahlo represented in all of them at levels of sophistication appropriate to their intended audiences. All three works are short and fairly small-format, but they offer richly illustrated photographs from the artist's life and selected images of Frida's paintings (the quality of reproduction is uneven). Each biography avoids citations but contains a bibliography for further reading, a glossary of key terms, and indexes. The books by Jones and Garza also contain chronologies, and the Jones book contains a list of media resources on Frida.

Because these books are biographies rather than art historical studies, most of their contents are devoted to recapitulating Frida's dramatic life history: considerable emphasis on her early years, the importance of her educational experiences, her nonconformity as a young person, her determination to recover from severe injuries, her life of political commitment and activism with Diego Rivera, and her accomplishments as an artist. All these topics are appropriate in series designed to present persons of achievement as potential role models. Most of the biographical information is derived from Hayden Herrera's landmark work, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (1983), but not all the information is entirely the same in each text, offering a good exercise for students in learning about variations in historical "fact" and interpretation. A slightly different picture of the artist and her life emerges from each account.

Frazier's *Frida Kahlo, Mysterious Painter* provides decent background on the pre-Columbian and Mexican revolutionary periods, citing their

significance in Frida's and Diego's work. Frazier wrote for the youngest audience, even providing definitions of words in the text in parentheses. She ably explains surrealism to her readers, and the color photographs of the Casa Azul (Kahlo's family home and now her official museum) and pre-Columbian art objects are appealing. Frazier's explanations of individual paintings are thorough but rely heavily on biography in interpreting them as transparent autobiographical expressions of strength and survival in the face of adversity. This approach exemplifies the dominant mode of analysis to date. Frazier's account might be the most accessible point of entry to the paintings for younger readers, but it would be more useful if she had made the connections between pre-Columbian and popular Mexican imagery and Kahlo's subject matter more explicit. Frazier at least acknowledges that the works are complex and multilayered and that any reading of Kahlo's paintings is conditioned by the knowledge and insight brought by the viewer. This idea is an important concept for children to grasp.

Hedda Garza's *Frida Kahlo, Mexican Painter* provides a slightly more adult and perhaps more sensationalized version of Frida's life: the first chapter is entitled "The Bus to Hell," and that on Diego Rivera, "The Frog Prince." Garza certainly tries to capture the reader's interest, devoting considerable attention to the various romantic liaisons of both partners and their tempestuous marriage. She also takes great liberties in describing Kahlo's emotions, responses to situations, and specific acts that have not been documented. Garza covers Frida's exhibitions and her connections to the Surrealist movement but provides no art-historical analysis of her paintings. Because the book features some particularly complex paintings such as *Portrait of Luther Burbank* (1931), *Tree of Hope* (1946), and *What the Water Gave Me* (1938), some attempt to explain these works would have been helpful. Also, given that Garza wrote her biography for the series entitled *Hispanics of Achievement*, it is disappointing that she did not include a short chapter on the significance of Frida and her paintings for the Chicano art movement and the role played by Chicana and Chicano artists and arts institutions in introducing Frida Kahlo to the U.S. art world and public.¹⁰ These connections should be made for the younger generation.

Jane Anderson Jones's *The Arts: Frida Kahlo* is the most substantial

10. The Galería de la Raza in San Francisco, an influential Chicano-Latino art space begun by a number of Bay Area artists in the late 1960s, organized an *homenaje* to Frida Kahlo for its 1978 exhibition commemorating the Day of the Dead, curated by artist Carmen Lomas Garza. A national call for artists to create works in homage to Frida brought a phenomenal response. The exhibition also included photographs of Kahlo lent by Emmy Lou Packard and an altar dedicated to Frida's memory. Chicano artists and writers like Amalia Mesa Bains and Rupert García have been exploring the significance of Frida's life and art for the Chicano community. Art historian Ramón Favela wrote about the Chicano contribution to understanding Frida in "La imagen de Frida Kahlo en la plástica chicana," in *Pasión por Frida*, 136–53.

of these three biographies in providing a cultural context for Frida's work and examining her sources (such as *retablos*), her impact on "los Fridos" (her students), and her legacy. Jones also discusses the significance as well as the difficulties of Frida's designation as a surrealist. Although the quality of illustrations is mediocre, Jones provides a list of Kahlo paintings that are more easily available for public viewing (derived from Herrera's *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*).¹¹ Jones's concluding sentences introduce important issues raised by art historians and feminist scholars for young students to ponder:

Some art critics have found Kahlo's extensive use of self-portraiture as a reason to consider her work less important. Such criticism reveals a double standard. Male artists, such as Rembrandt van Rijn and Albrecht Dürer, are praised for objective self-examination when they paint what they see in the mirror, but female artists are considered vain and self-absorbed when they paint their own portraits. Kahlo's self-portraits explore the realities of being a Mexican, of being a woman, and of being crippled by both emotional and physical pain. . . . The work of Frida Kahlo leads the audience into a new understanding of how different cultures affect each other, of how ancient beliefs inform modern consciousness, and of how one artist attempted to "give birth to herself" and paint "the most wonderful poem of her life." (P. 94)

This summation provides a good incentive for students to read further at a more advanced level.

Books for General and Scholarly Audiences

Malka Drucker's *Frida Kahlo* and Robin Richmond's *Frida Kahlo in Mexico* offer the general reading public two more biographies of the artist combined with interpretations of her artwork. Drucker's book first appeared in 1991 as *Frida Kahlo: Torment and Triumph in Her Life and Art*, as part of the Barnard Biography Series from Bantam Books. Written in an enthusiastic tone, the book unfortunately contains many inaccuracies and inconsistencies. It is also problematic in lacking citations and any bibliography. Beyond Drucker's acknowledgments, in which she mentions Hayden Herrera's biography, David and Karen Crommie's film, *The Life and Death of Frida Kahlo*, and a few friends of Frida Kahlo whom she interviewed, she does not indicate the sources of her information. Drucker's statement thanking certain individuals for "their help in leading me to other Frida devotees" is indicative of how she approached her subject—as a devotee. This perspective is also implied in the explanation in the foreword that Drucker wanted to provide a narrative that would clarify Frida's life and art: "The legends and myths surrounding Frida's brief, full life add to the intriguing mystery. To understand this richly complicated woman requires a willingness to read between the lines." But facts can be contradic-

11. Hayden Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings* (New York: Harper, 1991).

tory, and competing interpretations can be inconsistent as well. It is difficult to trust an authorial voice as interpreter that at one point offers opposing interpretations of a key painting such as *Las dos Fridas* (p. 102).

Perhaps the most disconcerting element in Drucker's biography is the all-too-common emphasis on Frida's work as the transparent (yet mysterious) confession or revelation of her own life and traumas. Her art is better approached as more complexly layered and often metaphorical constructions of herself, of the political sphere, and of the many Mexicos in which she lived and painted.

Frida Kahlo in Mexico by Robin Richmond is part of another series entitled *Painters and Places*. Although still intended for a general readership, this book is far more ambitious in scope. Its slim large-format text features many three-quarter-page full-color illustrations of Kahlo's paintings; photographs of Mexico, Frida, and the Casa Azul; images of pre-Columbian art; and paintings of pre-Columbian civilizations by Diego Rivera. While brief, this volume achieves a more comprehensive survey of Mexican history and Frida's life and work. Richmond attempts a serious yet personalized analysis of several paintings, once again employing a psychological approach (she consulted psychiatrists in preparing the book) that is combined with superficial explanations for Frida's inclusion of Mexican imagery and artifacts. The outcome of all this is confusion. Richmond states that she created the book to provide the missing formal and substantive iconographic analyses of paintings that would go beyond the autobiographical dimension, yet she does not discuss formal issues and interprets the pre-Columbian imagery only as markers for Frida's emotional states. In Richmond's assessment, these images seem to have no real cultural or political significance. She addresses the recent fetishization but only to criticize those scholars whom she perceives as using Frida for their own political agendas (p. 15). Richmond presumes to speak for the artist in this regard, even stating that Frida "would have hated that her work was put to a didactic purpose" (p. 15).

Richmond offers two detailed chapters on pre-Columbian, conquest-period, and revolutionary histories but does not integrate this vast material into a substantive analysis of Frida's paintings. Richmond claims that Frida's art mirrors the confused nature of being Mexican. The problematic nature of this argument becomes apparent in Richmond's inability to discuss the significance of pre-Columbian, colonial, revolutionary, and popular cultures in Frida's specific appropriations and transformations. The European and the indigenous elements are reduced to stereotypes of culture versus nature, which diminishes or even invalidates many of Richmond's observations. For example, she emphasizes the Aztecs' irrationality, their superstitious nature that continues into the present, and their "notorious" and "infamous" barbaric practices, asserting that this was the part of Mexico that Frida must have appreciated as

an aspect of her own nature. The melodramatic and personalized tone is evident in Richmond's suggestion that Kahlo must have been disturbed at having been born at the locus of the fall of Tenochtitlán: "What shame to have had her family home, the Blue House on the corner of Calle Londres and Calle Allende, built on the very birthplace of the New Spain!" (p. 43).

Richmond seems to appreciate Kahlo's identification with the pre-Columbian past but does not contextualize it sufficiently in postrevolutionary Mexico, when the intelligentsia and ruling classes all worked toward constructing a national identity based largely on the civilizations of the ancient past. It is well known that Frida's environment was heavily imbued with indigenismo. What is remarkable about her paintings is the way she absorbed the influences of her contemporaries and created an artistic vocabulary, a series of metaphors and myths that became her own. Frida did not narrate the grand sweep of history as Rivera and others did. Rather, she transformed myths and concepts for the purposes of her own mythologized and often opaque narrative.

Richmond's analysis of these aspects of Kahlo's oeuvre is superficial and often incorrect, even though she conducted considerable research and spent time in Mexico interviewing associates of Kahlo and Rivera. For example, Richmond writes about the rich vegetation that often provides the backdrop to Frida's self-portraits as claustrophobic and indicative of the artist's own depressed emotional state, without acknowledging the importance of Roberto Montenegro's *indigenista* paintings that feature a similarly dense foliage backdrop (p. 126). When Richmond analyzes several of the self-portraits with monkeys, she interprets their meaning exclusively according to Western thought, not at all according to their pre-Columbian significance. In the latter context, monkeys connote sexuality and fertility but not licentiousness and unfaithfulness. What came through to this reader was Richmond's own negative responses to pre-Columbian cultures and art and Frida's monkeys, which she finds predatory and uncomfortably proprietary about Frida. Richmond comments on the *Self-Portrait with Small Monkey* (1945), "The slightly sinister crouching terra-cotta idol is a symbolic nod towards her cherished Indian roots" (p. 126). Moreover, "Fulang Chang's beady eyes stare impassively from beyond her right shoulder. He is bound to her by a ribbon of slimy green, but of his own volition. His proprietary paw snakes around her long, muscular neck in a gesture of willing bondage. Her own enthrallment to her injuries. . . ." (p. 126).¹² Thus Richmond too falls into an

12. Nancy Deffebach (formerly Nancy Breslow) has been much more successful in determining the significance and uses of pre-Columbian imagery in the work of Frida Kahlo. She includes the use of monkeys within that category. Deffebach examined artifacts and glyphs, monkeys and mythology, and the use of the sun and moon. She has also provided an exhaustive study of what Kahlo could have known about pre-Columbian art and civilization and the ways in which this knowledge was carefully selected and transformed in her

unsophisticated and psychologized reading of Frida's paintings as expressions of depression and despair. There is more to these paintings, as Richmond attempts to understand in her emphasis on Mexico and Mexican history. Unfortunately, Richmond's stereotypical reading of Mexico's past and present as grim and dismal permits her to see Frida's use of Mexico only as a reflection of the artist's own misery. The result is disappointing.

Raquel Tibol's *Frida Kahlo: An Open Life*, translated by Elinor Randall, presents pieces written between 1953 and 1974. This first monograph on Kahlo was originally published in Mexico in 1977 and was revised in 1983. Tibol, an Argentine art critic who has lived in Mexico for many years, knew Kahlo toward the end of her life. Some of Tibol's writing derives directly from interviews that read more like dictated pronouncements. Tibol's contribution is the variety of perspectives on Frida's ideas, worldview, and environment, along with many pieces of Kahlo's own writings. Of particular interest is the text of "Portrait of Diego," an essay Kahlo wrote in 1949 that has been difficult to locate in translation (pp. 137–54).¹³ A few problems arise with the translation itself, as when some words are translated literally rather than into more common English equivalents.

Tibol provides a useful history of the art world in Mexico in the 1940s and a fuller portrait of Frida as teacher. The book also includes an important clinical history written in 1946 by Dr. Henriette Begun. *Frida Kahlo: An Open Life* is not intended to be a scholarly work of art history, and Tibol's assertions are not necessarily based on thorough research. Yet the book represents a rich resource of primary and secondary materials that are valuable and fascinating for scholars as well as for more general readers.

Sarah Lowe's *Frida Kahlo* was written for the Universe Series on Women Artists. This book is intended for general readers and scholars alike who are serious about understanding Kahlo's artwork as more than pictorial autobiography. Lowe's goal is to place Kahlo's artistic production within the framework of larger art movements while acknowledging the specificity of her life and point of view. Lowe is particularly interested in how Kahlo formulated her aesthetic. The author begins by analyzing the tension always present in Kahlo's paintings. Lowe finds it in not only the subject matter, which virtually all other Kahlo analysts focus on, but also in the style in which Kahlo painted, her "highly controlled, tiny brush strokes, realistic execution, and inclusion of minute details [that] work together to create a stark contrast to the violent and subversive motifs in her work" (p. 11). Lowe examines Kahlo's efforts to construct

paintings. See Nancy Breslow, "Frida Kahlo: A Cry of Joy and Pain," *Americas* 32, no. 3 (Mar. 1980):33–39; and Nancy Deffebach, "Pre-Columbian Symbolism in the Art of Frida Kahlo," M.A. thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1991.

13. See "Portrait of Diego," translated by Nancy Breslow and Amy Weiss Narea, *Calyx: A Journal of Art and Literature by Women*, no. 5 (Oct. 1980):80–89, 92–108 (published in Corvallis, Oregon).

herself in her paintings, to “produce a meaningful way to situate herself” in all ways—as a woman, as a Mexican woman, as a female artist, as an invalid, as a wife, as a lover, as a bisexual, as a woman without children, as an atheist, as a Communist political activist, as an indigenista (p. 11).

One example of how Lowe interprets a single work of art by placing it within multiple contexts is her analysis of the painting *My Nurse and I* (1937). In it a baby Frida with an adult head is being suckled by an Indian wet nurse, whose body is based on a ceramic Jalisco figure of a nursing mother but whose face is a stone Teotihuacán mask. Lowe interprets the centrality of Frida’s body and her enlarged adult head as drawing attention to herself as the creator of the image and to the painting as not a literal representation of her own experience of being nursed by an Indian woman but “rather a projection into the past that enables Kahlo to formulate a self in the present” (p. 48). For Lowe, this work and the startling “ex-voto” *My Birth* (1932) may be part of a series that Kahlo may have envisioned as documenting key moments in her life according to both the Aztec codex tradition and the Spanish colonial codices. The latter were created to understand and better control the native populations and had to be legible in both Nahuatl and Spanish. Lowe links several paintings as part of this hypothetical series: *My Birth*, *My Nurse and I*, her 1926 *Self-Portrait* depicting an adolescent Frida, and the 1931 marriage portrait *Frida and Diego Rivera*. According to Lowe, these images are analogous to the codices in providing “vital information, conveying her own history, recording her experiences” (p. 50).

Kahlo’s self-representation as Mexican implies a multileveled association: for understanding oneself as Mexican is to be inscribed in overlapping cultures. The experience of colonization, the struggle for independence, and the articulation of an artistic identity free from cultural imperialism was always at the center of Kahlo’s art. Her unwillingness to be labeled forced her to confront and reclaim her heritage, to search for political, cultural, and personal identity that is the core of her life and art. . . . [S]he had to reinvent herself to become herself. (P. 50)

Although Lowe cannot document her assertion of a codex-inspired series, it is a fascinating hypothesis that strings together individual works of art, Kahlo’s knowledge of pre-Columbian and colonial documents and practices, and her precise choices and renderings of objects of significance in her own artistic language and mythology. Lack of documentary proof is a real drawback in several of Lowe’s interpretations. Yet they make sense because they are cohesive enough and agree with what is now known about Kahlo’s expertise in Mexican culture of different periods and her methods of work. These interpretations are far more intellectually challenging and emotionally satisfying than Richmond’s analyses, which seem to suffer from misgivings about pre-Columbian civilizations and artifacts as grim and disturbing, an attitude not shared by Kahlo. For example, Richmond sees the Teotihuacán mask in *My Nurse and I* as alienating,

recalling Frida's own alienation from her mother, who could not nurse her. Lowe's study provides many provocative and intriguing ideas to build on and take back to the corpus of Frida's work.

Religious Imagination and the Body: A Feminist Analysis was written by Paula Cooley, a professor of religious studies. She explains in the introduction that she intends to examine the "significance of the body in the context of religious life and practice . . . , [addressing] such vital concerns as the role of the body in religious experience, the impact of gender or sexual difference on religious experience and its authority, and the viability of women's religious experience as an authoritative alternative to male-centered and male-dominated culture" (n.p.). Frida Kahlo's paintings are assessed in the fifth chapter, "Site, Sign, and Imagination." In it Cooley explicates "mapping" as a process of symbolic construction that metaphorically "refers to the interaction of site and sign in the conceptualization of 'body'" (p. 90).

Cooley's analysis of Kahlo's paintings insists on the artist's deliberate and consistent ambiguities, which have occasioned many conflicting interpretations of her work. Cooley decries the psychologizing of Frida, particularly her sexuality and inability to have children, which privatizes and domesticates Kahlo by removing her from the social and the political arenas. Cooley also believes that for Kahlo, the personal dimension would have included issues of ethnicity and class and that although Kahlo would have readily agreed to psychological analysis of her work, she never would have shut out the other multiple readings. Cooley scrutinizes several paintings, including *My Birth* (1932), *A Few Small Nips* (1935), *Tree of Hope* (1946), and *The Little Deer* (1946). For Cooley, multiple perspectives like those created by Frida and the resulting multiple interpretations suggest resistance and a struggle over signification itself, with the body being the site of the struggle among "multiple social and physical forces over its signification. . . . For example, her own refusal to de-politicize her work and her employment of religious symbolism conspire to re-contextualize gender difference by resisting cultural stereotypes" (p. 108). Kahlo thus becomes a case study in the very process of creation through the tension she establishes by insisting on the simultaneity of the universal and the particular and through the use of religious symbols to present her connection to postrevolutionary nationalism. Cooley argues that although Frida was an avowed atheist, her use of religious symbolism—even if desacralized—posits a religious sensibility as a "ritualistic transvaluing of the ordinary that reflects a deeply held faith" (p. 108). Here Cooley's analysis provides readers with yet another avenue for situating and coming to terms with the complexities of Frida's work. This approach acknowledges the transformative quality of her imagery in her political and personal need to construct a self as a site of conflict, resistance, confusion, clarity, and understanding.

Latin American Women Artists, Kahlo, and Look Who Else: A Selective Annotated Bibliography was compiled by Cecilia Puerto and includes a forward by Elizabeth Ferrer. This reference work is an excellent resource for students and scholars of all ages and levels of accomplishment. It is the first single bibliographical source on the topic, with more than fifteen hundred entries organized according to individual artists within specific countries. The volume also features a listing of general works about Latin American women artists, organized by country, and an appendix covering collective exhibitions. The section on Frida Kahlo is substantial but not exhaustive, as suggested by the subtitle. Puerto chose 135 entries on Kahlo and annotated many of them, greatly facilitating the bibliography's usefulness. They are divided into several sections: books and other monographic works; periodical articles and book chapters; exhibition catalogs; and video recordings. Armed with this work and Rupert García's 1983 bibliography of Frida Kahlo, anyone interested in serious research will be well prepared. Only one kind of important resource is missing: graduate theses and dissertations. Puerto cites only two. Many others can be located through interlibrary loan and University Microfilms. Some of these resources will eventually see their way into print and thus become more accessible, but many will not. To find these kinds of items, it is still necessary to comb through footnotes and bibliographies.

An important aspect of *Latin American Women Artists* for those familiar only with Frida Kahlo is the large number of well-known modern and contemporary women artists included in Puerto's entries. It is to be hoped that such rich material will stir interest in the work of other artists. Kahlo is not the only dynamic or challenging Latin American woman artist, but she remains one of the most compelling for reasons discussed in this essay. She chose the arts of Mexico from pre-Columbian times onward as an ongoing resource for building her own artistic language, but she also preserved elements from her study of European art history and her interactions with the avant garde. Frida chose herself as her subject matter for constructing an identity that was never merely autobiographical but also participated in constructing culture, history, and mythology in resistance to stereotyping, imperialism, and the continuing threat of simplification.¹⁴

14. The 1995 publication of *The Diary of Frida Kahlo*, along with an introduction by Carlos Fuentes and an essay by Sarah Lowe, provides the latest document for Frida students and scholars to examine. Some other recent publications were designed to take advantage of the continuing passion for Frida, such as *Frida Kahlo: The Camera Seduced*, a memoir by Elena Poniatowska and an essay by Carla Stellweg (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1992); and Guadalupe Rivera and Marie-Pierre Colle, *Frida's Fiestas: Recipes and Reminiscences of Life with Frida Kahlo* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1994). These works nonetheless provide enjoyable reading and viewing experiences as well as insights into different aspects of the artist's persona.