Analysis of the Effects the Tragedies and Illnesses of Frida Kahlo Had on her Artwork

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ABSTRACT

Frida Kahlo experienced more tragedies by the age of twenty-five than many of us will ever experience. The terrible bus accident she was involved in created a web of illnesses and unhappiness that would define her entire life and cause her health to spiral downward. These tragedies surfaced in her work and proved to be a huge influence. She showed her true feelings and views of herself through her pieces. Each piece is unique to the period of her life and what she was suffering at the time.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Herrera (47-61) in Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo, “Chapter 4: Accident and Aftermath,” on the afternoon of September 17, 1925, in Mexico City, Frida was on a trolley that plowed into a gas-laden wooded bus. Her resulting injuries included a spinal column being broken in three places, a broken collarbone, two broken ribs, eleven fractures to her right leg, a left shoulder jolted out of joint, a pelvis broken in three places, and a steel rod that literally skewed her body at the level of the abdomen, entering the left side and coming out through the vagina. As a result of these injuries, Frida would have at least thirty-two surgeries over the span of her remaining life.

One year later, in the late summer of 1926, after her recovery, Frida painted her first self-portrait for her lover, Alejandro. In this first self-portrait, Frida depicted herself in a dark, melancholic mood, wearing a romantic wine-red, velvet dress. She painted herself to look beautiful, vibrant, and fragile while holding out her right hand, as if to request the forgiveness of Alejandro from a dispute they had.

Self-Portraits

(1) In Discoursing Frida: The Art History and Popular Celebrity of Frida Kahlo, “Frida of the Blood-Covered Paint Brush,” Linauer (54-85) analyzed three self-portraits:

1. (1) The Little Deer (1946) represents her resistance to gender dichotomy. She portrays herself with the body of a male deer with antlers and testicles, yet wearing a dainty, feminine earring, making her a bisexual hybrid. This metaphorically represents “symptom” and “punishment” represented by nine arrows puncturing the deer’s body.

2. (1) Tree of Hope (1946) depicts two sides of herself, one being a mangled patient with only her back torso exposed with a thick slash, and one strong, healthy version sitting on the bedside of the mangled patient. After this highly devastating surgery, Frida attended therapy. This painting relates to that by illustrating how mental health would be inscribed on the physical body and presents an optimistic prognosis for her psychological recovery.

3. (1) Self-Portrait with the Portrait of Doctor Farill (1951). Unlike her previous self-portraits, this painting portrays her without sexuality. She appears to have accepted the authority of doctors and is no longer planning on continuing in her rebellious ways. The blood-covered paint brushes along with the heart-palette are thought to represent the therapeutic aspects of painting. This painting is seen to have a deeper hidden message. While she intended for it to be a statement of resignation to the doctors, when one takes a closer look, it could actually represent the very restrained, asexual persona that she resisted.

(2) As stated in Imaging Her Selves: Frida Kahlo’s Politics of Identity & Fragmentation (Ankori 111-116), by the time Frida produced Remembrance of an Open Wound (1938), she had undergone three foot surgeries and had the trophic ulcer removed. The self-exposure reveals two wounds, one of which was real, the other symbolic. The bandaged foot represents a wounded foot while the bleeding slash on the upper part of the inner thigh evokes a vaginal association. This represents not only a physical condition, but also a remembrance of an unhealing wound from the past, likely referring to the steel pole that penetrated her inner thigh evokes a vaginal association. This represents not only a physical condition, but also a symbolic. The bandaged foot represents a wounded foot while the bleeding slash on the upper part of the body of a male deer with antlers and testicles, yet wearing a dainty, feminine earring, making her a bisexual hybrid. This metaphorically represents “symptom” and “punishment” represented by nine arrows puncturing the deer’s body.

(3) The Broken Column (1944). Frida was experiencing a flare-up of her accident wounds and physical deterioration. In this piece, she depicts herself with a brutal vertical fracture. This invented wound runs from the neck to waist and emphatically forced open Frida’s body. This implies a violent “breaking open.” This becomes a symbol of her fractured and violated self.

WORKS CITED


Photographs: (from top left to bottom right)

http://staff.pvccom.k12.nj.us/ahohn/frida/frida trabalhavais/FRIDA/PICS/Kahlo_the_little_deer.jpg

http://www.pinterest.com/pin/179354573626392362/

http://www.pinterest.com/pin/65673828309359933/

http://calitreview.com/images/Kahlo_The_Broken_Column_1944.jpg

METHODOLOGY

To discover the influence Frida Kahlo’s illnesses had on her art work, I had to do much research through analysis of her paintings by others. To uncover the impact felt by Frida, I have had to analyze many of her paintings to find out her true feelings about herself and her situation at the time.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Wendy K. Wilkins, Ph.D., Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs
Gloria C. Cox, Ph.D., Dean, Honors College
Susan Brown Eve, Ph.D., Associate Dean, Honors College
David W. Hartman, Ph.D., Department of Anthropology, College of Public Affairs and Community Service

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