

## New York City 1938 ... Frida Kahlo's First Solo Exhibition

by Stella Crouch

Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) was a seminal artist known for her bold depictions of pain and passion. In October 1938, Frida traveled to New York City for her first solo exhibition at the Julien Levy Gallery, 602 Madison Ave (at 57th St.). The show was held from November 1 - 15. "Closely connected to the Surrealist movement, Levy was responsible for hosting the first solo exhibitions of numerous important artists including Alberto Giacometti, Salvador Dalí, and Lee Miller" (Roberts, 2009). It was here Kahlo's career changed forever.

This pivotal point in Kahlo's career coincided with one of the most tumultuous periods of the 20th century. In 1938 the Nazis had invaded Austria in the Anschluss in March and annexed the Sudetenland by the Munich Agreement in September. The previous year had been full of interesting events in Kahlo's life. That year Kahlo and her husband Diego Rivera were in the midst of hosting Leon Trotsky, the Russian Marxist leader and theorist, and his wife Natalia Sedova at Kahlo's family home, La Casa Azul in Mexico City. Kahlo and Trotsky would become lovers for a period during his stay.

In the midst of Trotsky's asylum, André Breton came to visit him in Mexico City with his wife, the painter Jacqueline Lamba. They stayed with Guadalupe Marin, Diego Rivera's previous wife, and there they met Kahlo and Rivera. Breton was a central figure and principal theorist of the Surrealist movement. Upon seeing Kahlo's painting *What Water Gave Me*, the metaphorical self-portrait of what life had to offer floating in her bathtub he labeled her an innate "surrealist" and offered to show her work in Paris. Breton would go on to help arrange the exhibit at the Julien Levy Gallery and wrote the essay that accompanied the exhibition.

The show's opening was a hit with Georgia O'Keeffe, Isamu Noguchi, and other prominent American artists in attendance. Of the twenty five of Kahlo's paintings on show approximately half of them were sold with prices ranging from one hundred to six hundred dollars. The show was well-received by the press, although many of the positive reviews reflected sexist, racist and patronizing beliefs especially prevalent at the time. Kahlo's exhibit was titled Frida Kahlo (Frida Rivera), still referring back to Diego Rivera's artistic fame. Time magazine for instance referred to Kahlo as the "wife of Diego Rivera" and her work as "little Frida's pictures" before admitting that "she proves herself a significant and intriguing painter in her own right."

Julian Levy himself was very close to Kahlo and it is believed they were lovers. He took a series of intimate photos of Kahlo in 1937 that are now famous. She is semi-nude in some of the photographs while lounging and smoking. During Levy's gallery's life from 1931 to 1949 Levy focused on shows of surrealism, an art movement he fell in love with in Paris when he befriended the likes of Marcel Duchamp, Eugene Atget and Berenice Abbott. Kahlo rejected this label of "surrealist" and was apparently apprehensive about the show in 1938 because she did not want Levy, Breton, or others associated with surrealism to pigeonhole her or her art. Frida once said, "They thought I was surrealist, but I was not. I never painted my dreams, I only painted my own reality".

In a photograph Kahlo stands proudly next to *What Water Gave Me* which was considered to be a centerpiece of the exhibit and was one of the most expensive works. In the painting Kahlo's toes stick out of the water in a bathtub and are reflected back into the water. I initially see them in the painting, along with the underwater view of her legs. The drain on the tub is bleeding above

the waterline which feels like it is plugging a wound rather than any water. The plug seems useless in its usual functional form but it takes on a new use in the painting. My eyes then refocus on what is floating on the water. Various parts of Kahlo's life come together in the water so much so that it has been referred to as a memoir of sorts.

*What Water Gave Me* stands in stark contrast with *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Leon Trotsky* shown at the exhibit as *Between the Curtains*, completed in 1937 also on show in the gallery. *Self-Portrait* shows no visible pain and the painting looks optimistic compared to *What Water Gave Me*. *Self-Portrait* is full of warm and soft colors, and Kahlo looks seductive and self-confident. As evident by the title, the painting was a gift for Trotsky on his birthday. A paper she holds in her one hand reads, "To Leon Trotsky, with all my love, I dedicate this painting on 7th November 1937. Frida Kahlo in Saint Angel, Mexico". I would argue Kahlo is every bit herself in both paintings. They aren't meant to represent the same aspects of her life. I believe Kahlo utilized *What Water Gave Me* to express her hurt, her influence, her family and her culture whereas in *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Leon Trotsky* she is mainly expressing her love, passion and style. Both paintings contain multiple sides of the same person on show and quite intimately.

Many of the paintings in the exhibition shared iconography which I believe allows the works to be in dialogue with one another. In *What Water Gave Me* the nude woman lying down on her side resembles Kahlo's in *Henry Ford Hospital*, painted on sheet metal, a first for Kahlo in 1932. She is lying on a bed in the hospital naked and experiencing a miscarriage. There are six objects floating around her, a fetus, a model of an abdomen, an orchid that looks like a uterus, a snail thought to represent the slowness of the abortion, pelvic bones, and a metal medical instrument. They are all connected to her via red ribbons that look like umbilical cords. The image of a couple in *What Water Gave Me* strongly resembles that of Kahlo's parents in *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I (Family Tree)* as well as the red ribbon like umbilical cord in *Henry Ford Hospital* represents that of the red ribbon connecting Kahlo to her family and her mother to a fetus in *Family Tree*. Kahlo completed the work to highlight both her European Jewish and her Mexican heritage. I believe Kahlo's work exemplifies the personal and political. Painted in 1936, *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I* is without a doubt autobiographical, but she used her art to communicate political messages and human rights violations. This painting was completed shortly after Hitler passed the Nuremberg laws banning interracial marriage which I believe influenced her work. Frida also evokes the connection and pain of childhood in many of the paintings on show at the exhibit. In *Mi Nana y Yo* or *My Nurse and I* Kahlo used oil paint on metal to complete the painting in 1937. It depicts herself as an infant with an adult head being breastfed by her indigenous wet nurse. Frida's mother was unable to breastfeed her because she was nursing Cristina, Kahlo's younger sister. The nurse was only contracted for a short period because she used to drink while on duty. The nurse is wearing a pre-Columbian funerary mask, and appears emotionally distant from Kahlo.

I can't help but think that one of the reasons for Kahlo's head looking adult and the nurse wearing the mask might be because she could not remember how they looked when she was young, but I do think the funeral mask serves as a representation of her lack of a bond with her mother and the death of that connection early on. The funerary mask also reminds me of *Girl with Death Mask* shown as *She Plays Alone* completed in 1938 and also shown in the exhibition. The oil painting presents a striking image of a little girl, thought to be Kahlo herself, wearing a skull mask worn on *Dia de los Muertos*. Another symbol of the festival is the flower she holds, most likely the *tagete* or marigold flower, which is the same one people place on graves in celebration of *Dia*

*de los Muertos*. The mask on the ground is a somewhat scary looking tiger face which looks a bit like a mask itself, apparently resembling one Kahlo had in her house as a child. Again Kahlo is connecting to her childhood, home and family as well as death, grief and pain.

Death and pain have a prominent presence in much of Frida's art but in few of Kahlo's paintings was it more evident than in *El Suicidio de Dorothy Hale* or *The Suicide of Dorothy Hale*. On the exhibition's opening night Kahlo met Clare Boothe Luce. Whether Kahlo was asked by Luce to paint Dorothy Donovan Hale or proposed it herself isn't entirely known but nevertheless at the gallery it was agreed that she would paint Hale, the late friend of both Kahlo and Luce. The portrait was intended to be a gift to Hale's grieving mother. Frida suggested a "recuerdo" (remembrance) painting. Although Luce didn't understand what that was, she agreed. What Kahlo created was graphic, detailing Hale's suicide, placing the corpse at the bottom of the painting having already jumped from her building. At the bottom of the painting in blood red Frida wrote in Spanish detailing the tragic suicide, "In New York City on the 21st of October 1938, at 6:00 in the morning, Dorothy Hale committed suicide by throwing herself from a very high window in the Hampshire House. In her memory [...], this retablo was executed by Frida Kahlo".

Some decades later, Clare told Hayden Herrera, one of Kahlo's biographers, of her feeling upon the painting's delivery: "I will always remember the shock I had when I pulled the painting out of the crate. I felt really physically sick. What was I going to do with this gruesome painting of the smashed corpse of my friend, and her blood dripping down all over the frame?" (Gregory, 2014). Luce was particularly unhappy with an angel in the corner of the painting waving a banner which wrote in Spanish her name and that she had requested the painting for Hale's mother. Luce wanted to destroy the painting with scissors, but was dissuaded by a friend, most likely Isamu Noguchi. Instead, she had Noguchi paint over the angel with the banner and remove it and gave the painting to a friend, though Noguchi later denied the claims he altered the painting in any way. I find it interesting that Luce did not expect a painting at least somewhat graphic and dark after attending the opening of the exhibition in New York as much of Kahlo's work portrayed pain in an uncensored and powerful way.

Kahlo's first solo exhibition catapulted her career away from Diego Rivera's and gave her many new opportunities. I believe the trajectory of her career would have looked very different had Kahlo not attended the exhibition in November of 1938 and certainly if it would not have taken place. While I still believe Kahlo did not receive the kind of recognition she deserved during her lifetime, this self-titled exhibition proved a pivotal role in her career, changed the direction of how her work would continue to be viewed throughout her lifetime and significantly impacted art history long after her death.

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