PERFORMING THE SELF AND THE OTHER: PORTRAITS AND SELF-PORTRAITS BY DIEGO RIVERA AND FRIDA KAHLO[1]

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"The Strange Couple from the Land of the Dot and the Line": although Frida Kahlo used this inscription on one page of her journal to identify an imaginary Egyptian couple she depicted in accompanying drawings, there is little doubt that she intended it to have a personal double meaning.[2]

Playing both visually and linguistically on Amarna ruler Akhenaton and his famous consort, Kahlo no doubt generated her fictional characters, *Ojo único, Neferisis*, and their little son, through a multi-layered process of psychic associations. Indeed, flanking the central fetus, the real historical spouses face each other in Kahlo's *Moses, or Nucleus of Creation*, a canvas painted in 1945 (probably around the time of her undated diary entry); and a contemporaneous statement clarifies Kahlo's interest in this pair: "I imagine", Kahlo mused, "that besides having been extraordinarily beautiful, [Nefertiti] must have been 'a wild one' and a most intelligent collaborator to her husband".[3]

Like Nefertiti and, of course, Frida Kahlo herself, *Neferisis* has thick conspicuous eyebrows. *Ojo único*, unlike Akhenaton, has a full fleshy look; so too his child and baby Moses. All three, in fact, more or less share the facial qualities of Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo's husband (whom she actu-

[1] This essay was written as a lecture for the international symposium *Diego Rivera: A Transcultural Dialogue*, held at the Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA) in February 1999 in conjunction with the opening of *Diego Rivera: Art and Revolution*, co-organized by INBA and CMA. I am indebted to William H. Robinson, CMA Associate Curator of Modern Art, for inviting me to speak on this topic at the symposium. I would also like to thank Irene Herner, Debby Tenenbaum, and Amy Reed Frederick, as well as Bertha Cea of the American Embassy in Mexico City, for helping to make this essay possible, and Leticia López Orozco for inviting me to publish it in *Crónicas*.

[2] All quotes from Kahlo's diary are taken from the 1995 Abrams English edition. The pages referenced in this essay are discussed by Lowe, 213-15, 220, 235.

[3] Herrera, *Frida*, 326 and 482, quoting an informal lecture by Kahlo on Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* given in 1945 at the home of Domingo Lavin.

ally married twice, in 1928 and, after a brief divorce, in 1940). Moreover, her word-picture of Nefertiti rather deftly encapsulates Frida's own autobiography.

A few pages earlier, Kahlo used a different set of artistic binaries to metaphorize her relationship to Rivera. Here she called herself '*Auxocromo*' and him '*Cromoforo*':

> She who wears the color and He who sees the color.
> Since the year 1922.
> Until always and forever. Now in 1944. After all the
> hours lived through.

In an annotation clearly meant for Rivera to read, Kahlo assigned her role in their marriage as subordinate, but complementary; "You fulfill", she proclaims, "*I* receive".

But was their union really so conventionally gender-specific? In a later diary entry, Kahlo specifically enunciates each and every role she believed that Rivera played in her life. Not all of these are typically masculine. Her list reads like a mantra:

> Diego *beginning*
> Diego *builder*
> Diego *my child*
> Diego *my boyfriend*
> Diego *painter*
> Diego *my lover*
> Diego "*my husband*"
> Diego *my friend*
> Diego *my mother*
> Diego *my father*
> Diego *my son*
> Diego = me

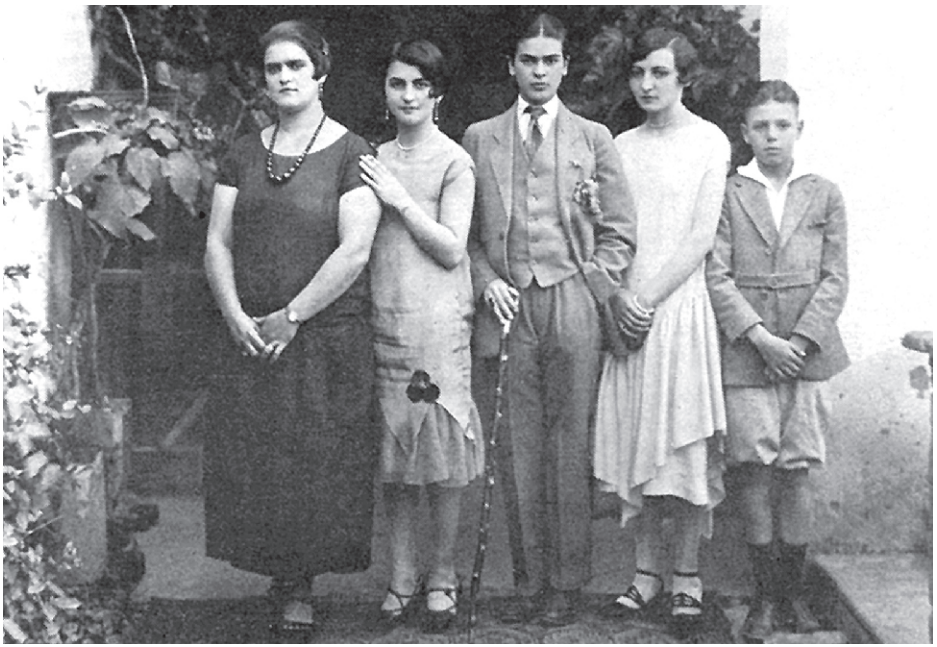
Once again, she concludes with meaningful wordplay:

> *Diego Universo*
> *Diversidad en la unidad.*

Without a doubt, the diversity between Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo was patently obvious to all; indeed, their very visible physical discrepancies led Kahlo's parents to complain she was contracting a ludicrous marriage "between an elephant and a dove".[4] Also apparent were the conspicuous distinctions between their oeuvres: the much more famous Rivera was primarily a muralist with grand social and political intentions. By contrast, Kahlo, influenced by primitive *retablo*s, created small, intensely introspective works. But was there a unity of intention and ethos that transcended or linked their opposing personal and artistic characteristics?

I will focus in this essay on addressing this question by examining their shared practice of making self-portraits and mutual depictions. Through these, Rivera and Kahlo

[4] Bambi, "Frida es una Mitad", *Excélsior* (México City), June 13, 1954, 6; quoted in Hayden Herrera, "Beaty to his Beast: Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera", in Witney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron, eds., *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership.* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 119.



Reprografía, *Frida y sus hermanas Adriana y Cristina, su prima Carmen y el niño Carlos Veraza*, 1926. Foto: Archivo Fotográfico Manuel Toussaint/IIE.

often portrayed their deepest feelings for their beloved Mexico and betrayed the complexity of their personal emotions.

Imbricated within an admittedly fractious alliance, their affinities and polarities –so closely tied to the strengths and weaknesses of their nation– often played out at a level of highest intensity when they looked inward and at each other. I will examine in particular the performative aspects of these portraits analyzing them as visual texts, in which Rivera and Kahlo invent meanings with both individual and national importance.

Rivera's vaunted ability to embroider the truth was a trait noticed early, and it took on more of his own gargantuan proportions throughout his life. In his largely fanciful 'autobiography', told to Gladys March between 1944 and 1957, he describes his first 'apparition' of Frida, their 1922 meeting on the scaffold while he, aged 37, was painting *Creation*, a mural at the National Preparatory School in Mexico City, and she was a 15-year old pre-medical student. "She had unusual dignity," Diego recalled, "and self-assurance, and there was a strange fire in her eyes. Her beauty was that

Frida Kahlo, *Autorretrato en la frontera entre México y Estados Unidos*, 1932, Óleo y collage sobre masonite.
Foto: Archivo Fotográfico Manuel Toussaint/IIE.

of a child, yet her breasts were well-developed".[5]

This event (which prompted Frida to tell friends her new ambition was to have the great painter's baby) supposedly took place only a few days after Rivera began living with Guadalupe Marin, who would soon become his first wedded wife and would remain his most important model of voluptuous femininity as seen in her incarnation as *The Liberated Earth*, at the Autonomous University of Chapingo.

In a particularly evocative passage in the March book, Rivera also tells of his first glimpse of Lupe. Whereas Kahlo was tiny and doll-like, Marin was "a strange and marvelous-looking creature, nearly six feet tall".

[5] March, 75.

> [Lupe] was black-haired, yet her hair looked more like that of a chestnut mare than a woman's. Her green eyes were so transparent she seemed to be blind. Her face was an Indian's, the mouth with its full, powerful lips open, the corners drooping like those of a tiger. The teeth showed sparkling and regular: animal teeth set in coral such as one sees in old idols. Held at her breast, her extraordinary hands had the beauty of tree roots or eagle talons. She was round-shouldered, yet slim and strong and tapering, with long, muscular legs that made me think of the legs of a wild filly.[6]

Although he had certainly taken immediate notice of Frida's budding chest, Rivera apparently did not feel similarly moved to rhapsodize either verbally or visually about the sexual nature of her physical characteristics, except to admire her mustache and her eyebrows. The latter seemed to him "like the wings of a blackbird, their black arches framing two extraordinary brown eyes". (Frida, on the other hand, fixated –in her diary and in humorous drawings– on what she considered Diego's most erotic body parts: his breasts and "flower-fountain", her petname for his penis!).[7]

Diego did describe Frida to Raquel Tibol in 1953 as "an extraordinarily handsome woman," but he qualified this remark in a telling way. Hers was not, he pointed out, "an ordinary and regular beauty", but "the exceptional and characteristic beauty of what she produces". Reckoning her "a vital force", Rivera lauded Kahlo's sincerity (which he termed "both tender and cruel"), giving a Marxist assessment of "her exactitude and intensity" as "always reaching a universal plane and extension and playing a social role we would dare to call poetically didactic and rigorously dialectic". Additionally, Rivera acclaimed Kahlo's "velocity", "absolute frankness", "fantastic logic", and "constant power to penetrate the ideas, intentions, and feelings of others". In short, he seems most attracted by her "great possibilities of imaginative creation".[8]

Notably, Rivera mentions to Tibol his wife's "ability to stand pain far beyond the normal". Kahlo had polio as a child which withered one of her legs, a physical characteristic she shared with the Aztec God of War. In September 1925, while a student at the Preparatory School, she was impaled by a rod in a bizarre collision between a tram and a bus. According

6 *Ibíd*., 74.

7 For Diego's description of Frida, see March, 102; for Frida's of Diego, Abrams edition of her diary, 17, commentary by Lowe, 213.

8 See Rivera, "Frida Kahlo and Mexican Art", *Boletin del Seminario de Cultura Mexicana*, v. 1 (oct., 1943) and Raquel Tibol, "Frida Kahlo, artista de genio", *La Prensa* (Buenos Aires, Argentina, July 12, 1953), excerpts reprinted in Tibol, "An Exchange of Looks", 65-66.

to an eyewitness (her boyfriend, Alejandro Gómez Arias), Frida was somehow thrown clear. She landed in the street, naked although sprinkled with the residue of another passenger's packet of gold dust.

Partially due to this accident, Kahlo subsequently had 32 operations (some needed and some not), several miscarriages, and numerous required abortions; she never *was* able to produce a little 'Dieguito'. Despite many extramarital liaisons with both men and women who obviously desired her, Kahlo always perceived her body as imperfect for love.[9]

Interestingly, although he depicted Lupe nude many times, Rivera represented Kahlo unclothed only once, right after their initial marriage when they were living temporarily in Cuernevaca so that he could paint a mural cycle at the Palace of Cortés. In 1930 Diego drew Frida's definitely somewhat boyish body as she sat on the edge of their bed wearing only high-heeled shoes, in the process of either clasping or unhooking a heavy beaded Indian necklace. The lithograph which was based on this pencil sketch indicates that Kahlo was not at ease posing for her husband naked. Her eyes are "modestly averted"; according to Rivera's most recent biographer, Patrick Marnham, "there is something sacrificial about [this depiction], in her resigned, submissive attitude, [there is] something almost masochistic".[10] In any case, Diego was never again inspired to use Frida as a model in this way.

Although Lupe Marin was actually a middle-class girl from Guadalajara, for Rivera her strong physicality and "tempestuous beauty" quite literally seemed to embody the indigenous vitality of primitive Mexico. Kahlo, whose mother was part Spanish/part Indian and whose father was a Hungarian Jew, had perforce to demonstrate the *Mexicanidad* Rivera loved in a more artificial manner. Frida, as seen in the "signature" carved into stone beneath her in *Self Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States* (1932) sometimes used one of her middle names to become 'Carmen Rivera'.[11] Indeed, her somewhat atypical *mestizo* status notwithstanding, she managed to exhibit *indigenismo* with the greatest panache.

[9] See Amy Fine Collins, "Diary of A Mad Artist", *Vanity Fair* (Sept. 1995), 185, citing an unpublished 1949-50 interview with Olga Campos in which Frida stated:

> The most important part of the body is the brain. Of my face I like the eyebrows and eyes. Aside from that I like nothing. My head is too small. My breasts and genitals are average. Of the opposite sex, I have the moustache and in general the face.

[10] Marnham, 229-30.

[11] See Rebecca Block and Linda Hoffman-Jeep, "Fashioning National Identity: Frida Kahlo in 'Gringolandia'", *Woman's Art Journal* 19 (Fall 1998/Winter 1999), 10, and Herrera, *Frida*, 134.

As Rivera told Tibol, Kahlo manifested her Mexicanness:

> in her hairdos, in the way she dresses, in her opulent taste for adorning herself with jewelry that is stranger and more beautiful than costly. She loves thousand-year-old jade, and she wears the huipil and the Tehuantepec costume with skirt of ironed batiste that the Tehuantepec women and those from Juchitán in Oaxaca used to wear and still do.

He proclaims with evident pride, that Frida's "manner of dress is the very embodiment of national splendor. She has never betrayed its spirit", without conceding that she donned the costume of the strong matriarchal cultures of the isthmus of Tehuantepec in large measure to please *his* fancy.[12]

Rivera's generative role in Kahlo's performance of *Mexicanidad* is clarified by examining photos and descriptions of her at other points in her life. It is particularly revealing that Frida did not present herself this way before she became involved with Diego (whom she once dubbed "her second accident"), nor during the year they were divorced. Many of her other outfits, however, demonstrate the co-option of equally theatricalized alternative identities. For instance, in several 1926 family pictures taken professionally by her father, Frida in natty male attire displays herself as declaratively androgynous.

Diego Rivera, *Fiesta del Día de Muertos*, fresco, Secretaría de Educación Pública.
Foto: Archivo Fotográfico Manuel Toussaint/ IIE.

Conversely, at the time Kahlo and Rivera re-met two years hence (at a party given by expatriate photographer Tina Modotti who, also modeled for,

[12] Tibol, "An Exchange of Looks", 65-66.

and had sexual relations with Rivera at Chapingo), Kahlo, often performed the ultra-femininity of a professional coquete. According to the jealous Lupe, when Frida came a second time to visit Diego at work, this time at the Ministry of Education, "her face was painted, she wore her hair Chinese style, her dress was décolleté à la flapper".[13] Or, when she appeared in more politicized contexts such as Modotti's gathering, Kahlo assumed the drab, asexual garb of a Russian Communist.

The earliest known picture of Diego and Frida together shows them marching side by side as PCM members, under the banner of the *Sindicato de Pintores y Escultore*s, in a 1929 Labor Day demonstration. Frida, now aged 22, her hair cut very short, wears something akin to a khaki Girl Guide uniform, complete with kerchief and sensible shoes; an enormous-bellied Diego –looking old enough to be her father (which he was at 43)– strides along in his own para-military outfit (but without the high boots, bandolier, or holster and pistol he sometimes sported to shock and amuse the tourists). His face is shaded from the May sun by his signature Stetson hat.

Certainly, one of the most important roles Kahlo and Rivera frequently adopted concurrently in their on-going *masquerade à deux* was as joint incarnations of what he termed the 'collective-individual'[14] spirit of Mexican revolutionary socialism. In order to signal solidarity with the proletariat, Diego sometimes traded the *macho* look for simple workman's duds, but his humility took on more than a whiff of posturing. A notable example of this is his triptych, *The Making of a Fresco*, painted in San Francisco at the California School of Fine Arts in 1931, where suspiciously Christ-like, he appears dead center, high up on the plank of a scaffold, but sitting backwards with his large buttocks amply displayed. Flanked not by attendant saints, rather similarly dressed-down technicians and co-workers, he relegates the architects in expensive suits and hats to the lowest register.

In Mexico City at the Ministry of Education, however, Rivera had also appropriated the latter persona. Presenting himself in a second-floor stairwell as an architect, not an artisan, may have been intended in this instance to express his self-perceived importance as 'the builder' of a new style of revolutionary muralism. But he does not look completely happy in this more bourgeois role. In August 1929, one of his American acolytes, Ione Robinson (purportedly yet another mistress), pulled no punches when she described in her diary the typically egotisti-

[13] Quoted in Herrera, *Frida*, 94.

[14] Rivera, "Frida Kahlo and Mexican Art", reprinted in David Craven, *Diego Rivera as Epic Modernist* (NY: G.K. Hall and Co., 1997), 184.

cal Diego as here "looking very sick to his stomach. He might well be feeling like that now, for there is an undercurrent of resentment against him that is growing very strong".[15] Indeed, slumped on a scaffold step below the painter Jean Charlot, Rivera refers somewhat disconsolately to the blueprints on his lap, while simultaneously keeping an eye on the sculptor Martinez Pintao at work. This pose was actually copied from a 1924 photo taken at the Ministry site by Modotti's lover Edward Weston, in which Rivera, looking even more world-weary, rests and smokes a cigarette.

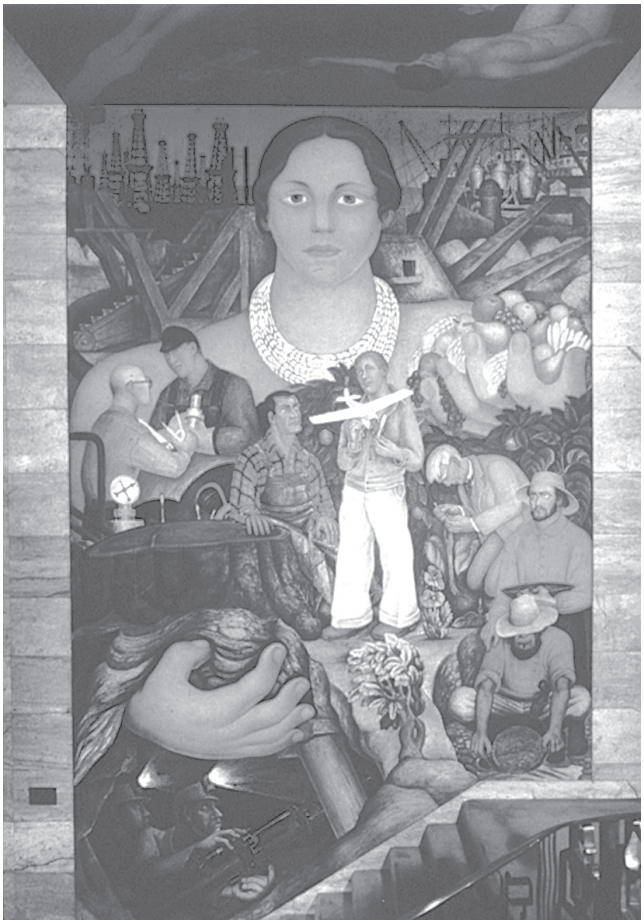
Elsewhere, on the ground floor of the Ministry in the Court of Fiestas, Rivera (easily identified once again by his autographic Stetson) is followed by Lupe in a fashionable cloche hat. Now, the artist makes eye contact with the viewer from the back of a motley crowd of revelers celebrating the November 1st festival of the Day of the Dead. In a happier, or perhaps more sardonic mood –both appropriate to the Mexican carnival spirit– Diego plays the Hitchcockian flâneur, mediating the spectacle and giving the traditional form of the participant self-portrait a rather witty update.

As Max Kozloff has convincingly argued, Rivera's seemingly insignificant cameo role on this panel may also be based in the artist's ongoing bid for legendary status.[16] About the time *The Day of the Dead* was being painted, in 1925, Diego described himself as a kind of *sui generis* everyman, in touch "with the sentiments

Reprografía, *Frida Kahlo y Diego Rivera*.
Foto: Archivo Fotográfico Manuel Toussaint/ IIE.

[15] Robinson, *A Wall to Paint On* (NY: E.P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1946), 105-6 (entry dated Mexico City, Aug. 11, 1929).

[16] Kozloff, "Orozco and Rivera: Mexican Fresco Painting and the Paradoxes of Nationalism", in Waldo Rasmussen, ed., *Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century* (NY: The Museum of Modern Art, 1993), 67.



Diego Rivera, *Alegoría de California*, 1931, fresco, San Francisco, California. Foto: Archivo Fotográfico Manuel Toussaint/IIE.

of his people". Speaking in the third person, Rivera proclaimed, not quite modestly, that:

> He was a unit identical with the thousands of Mexican co-workers. The artist did not have to pretend any spiritual or philosophical posture, nor much less take a political stand, but simply listen to his own deepest feelings . . .[17]

Work on the 124 frescoes at the Ministry spanned the period 1923 to 1928, broken only by Rivera's short trip to Russia and the project at Chapingo. By the time he had com-

17 Rivera, "Los frescos de la Secretaría de Educación," in Antonio Rodríguez, *A History of Mexican Mural Painting*, trans. By Marina Corby (NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1969). Originally pub. in *El Arquitecto* (Sept. 1925), 17. Quoted in Kozloff, 67-8.

pleted the last installment, an episode of the second-floor *Corrido of the Revolution*, known variously as *The Arsenal, Distribution of Arms*, and *The Insurgents*, in current American slang, Lupe was "history". As the American leftist Bertram Wolfe (Rivera's first biographer), put it, looking at this composition, anyone who knew him well would come to the obvious conclusion that "Diego had a *new* girl".[18]

Instead of celebrating himself at the center of *The Arsenal*, Rivera situated Frida Kahlo in the place of honor, presenting her as a radical Mexican version of Saint Joan.[19] Dressed not in Joan's suit of armor, but her tailored red shirt with Communist star pinned above the breast, Frida stands proudly amidst denim-clad worker-soldiers, distributing materiel. Above her, one of the men holds aloft a red flag emblazoned with the hammer and sickle, symbols the Mexican Party adopted from the USSR.

Of course, Kahlo did not really participate in such dangerous militant activities as handing out arms to revolutionaries, although Rivera's fellow muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, seen gazing outward at left, actually did. Tina Modotti, by then embroiled in a complicated three-way relationship with Comintern agent Vittorio Vidali, and the soon-to-be assassinated, exiled Cuban Communist Julio Antonio Mella, is featured with them at far right.

It seems significant that, by comparison, the only time Kahlo painted herself in male attire with mannish hair, she wears her husband's grossly oversized suit, and has just shorn her own tresses to spite him after their 1939 divorce. There is no patriotic banner above her head proclaiming a ballad of the Revolution as seen in *The Arsenal*; instead, she seems to subtly mock Rivera's epic, messianic pretensions by inscribing at the top of her picture the mundane plaintive lyrics of a popular romantic song: "See, if I loved you, it was for your hair; now you're bald, I don't love you any more".[20] Once again, by contrast, she often depicted herself as a Tehuana or indigenista, while Diego presented her only twice in the guise of his beloved '*una Mexicana, muy bonita*'.

This person came into being on October 21st 1929, when Frida borrowed a skirt, blouse and rebozo, or shawl, from her Indian maid in order to get married: not in church, but at the City Hall in Coyoacán, a Mexico City suburb. Her father, who

[18] Bertram Wolfe, *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera* (NY: Stein and Day, 1939), 244.

[19] Carlos Fuentes, "Introduction", Abrams ed. of Kahlo's *Diary*, 11.

[20] See Tibol, *An Open Life*, 23-5. This portrait has been extensively discussed by art historians in Mexico, the U.S. and Great Britain, especially feminists and Marxists. See, for example, Terry Smith, "From the Margins: Modernity and the Case of Frida Kahlo", *Block*, no. 8 (1983), 11-23.

Diego Rivera, *La educación obrera*, 1929, 1935, 1945, fresco, detalle, Palacio Nacional. Foto: Archivo Fotográfico Manuel Toussaint/IIE.

somewhat oddly warned Diego that trouble might lie ahead, as his favorite child was actually *un demonio oculto* was the bride's only family member to attend. Even he seems to have been confused as to whether this unlikely union was really happening; when he rose and queried those assembled, "Gentlemen, is it not true that we are play-acting?",[21] Guillermo Kahlo quite unintentionally summarized a key component of his daughter and new son-in-law's unusual romance.

As her biographer Hayden Herrera has noted, Kahlo also looks somewhat uncomfortable in her indigenous costume in *Diego and I*, a wedding portrait she created after the fact, in 1931 in *Gringolandia*, Frida's pejorative term for what she considered the too mechanistic and materialistic United States. (A preparatory sketch for this folkloric and stylized canvas –painted as a gift for the man who arranged Rivera's U.S. entry visa– shows their positions reversed. Kahlo wears her double-flounced dress, and her husband looks more informal without his jac-

[21] Quoted in Herrera, *Frida*, 99. For recent feminist discussion of the wedding, see Lindauer, 12-20.

Diego Rivera, *Sueño de una tarde dominical en la Alameda Central*, 1947, fresco, detalle, Hotel del Prado. Foto: Archivo Fotográfico Manuel Toussaint/IIE.

ket, brushes and palette.) By the time she developed her signature self-images mostly painted during the 1940s, Frida had obviously learned to manipulate with greater artistic sophistication the rhetoric underlying her performative status as an exemplar of Mexican cultural identity.

Rivera's most conspicuous presentation of Kahlo this way was in his 1940 *Allegory of California*, also painted in San Francisco, in close proximity to their re-marriage in that city. In this case, on the far right panel, in full Tehuana regalia, and with a mask-like, impassive Pre-Columbian face, it is she who wields palette and brushes, standing next to a makeshift easel. Purportedly to reinforce the fresco's theme of Pan-American Unity, Rivera sits behind Kahlo, clasping hands around 'the tree of life and

love' with actress Paulette Goddard, the wife of Charlie Chaplin, who is depicted several times elsewhere in the mural. Of course, Diego and Goddard were also having an affair, so once again he was acting the *macho* or *pelado*, flaunting his most elemental impulses. In her isthmus clothing, Kahlo, as opposed to signifying matriarchal power, reads here as *La Chingada*, the personification of a long-suffering Mexico violated and deceived by liars and outsiders.[22] Rivera gets himself off the hook, so to speak, by implying (more than somewhat callously) that Frida has the power to sublimate her personal anguish through her art.

In the March 'autobiography' Diego admits, "If I loved a woman, the more I loved her the more I wanted to hurt her. Frida was only the most obvious victim of this disgusting trait",[23] and *Pan-American Unity* was actually not the first nor the only time he committed *chingar*, publicly humiliating her. Rivera highlighted in colossal size the head of American tennis star Helen Wills Moody, another of his paramours, at the Pacific Stock Exchange in 1930-31 and, even worse, a few years later created what Jean Franco incisively terms 'a male polygamous fantasy'[24] when painting *The Struggle of the Classes*, the south stairwell panel at the National Palace in Mexico City. There he included, in the guise of *Cardenista* teachers of Marxist education, not only Frida (wearing a hammer and sickle necklace), but her sister Cristina, recently divorced. The latter's two children, Antonio and Isolda, are seated next to their mother.

Rivera's liaison with the more seductive and fertile Cristina (who appears at the National Palace inappropriately dressed for revolution, with an even more blank-eyed, orgasmic stare than Goddard's) was, without a doubt, his cruelest betrayal. Earlier, in 1929, the beguiling and curvaceous Cristina had served as his model for Eve corrupted by the serpent at the Ministry of Health and Education; Frida had naively suggested her for this position. Kahlo's own subsequent affair with Leon Trotsky –for whom she painted a primitivistic self-depiction

[22] For a recent discussion of Rivera's *Pan-American Unity* and *Allegory of California*, see Paul J. Karlstrom, "Rivera, Mexico and Modernism in California Art", *in Diego Rivera: Art and Revolution*, 219-34. For the *pelado* and *macho* as Mexican types, see Samuel Ramos, *The Mexican Mind: Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico*, (México, I*mprenta Mundial, 1934); Octavio Paz, The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico*, transl. By Lysander Kemp (NY: Grove Press Inc. and London: Evergreen Brooks Ltd., 1991); Mathew C. Gutmann, *The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1996).

[23] See Herrera, 183.

[24] See Franco, *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1989)as well as Lindauer, 31-33.

Frida Kahlo. *El amoroso abrazo del universo, de la Tierra, Diego, yo y el Sr. Xólotl*, óleo sobre masonite, Foto: Archivo Fotográfico Manuel Toussaint/IIE.

holding a message "dedicated with all love"– was probably in retaliation, and indeed Diego, infuriated when the tables were turned, provoked a situation with truly momentous political repercussions.

In point of fact, many who knew them believed that more important to the success of Rivera and Kahlo's union than sexual satisfaction was the perfect match between her desire to be a mother and his to be pampered and indulged like an overgrown child. Artistically, both expressed this psychologically fraught connection (Oedipal in more ways than one), from obviously different personal vantage points.

In his *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in the Alameda*, painted in 1947-48 for the dining room of Mexico City's Hotel del Prado, among the 140 historical and genre figures (many posed by friends and family members), the 60-year old Rivera included himself twice in the guise of a youth.[25] At the far end of the composition he is seen in a wide-brimmed hat and sailor suit eating a taco. More prominently, slightly left of center, he appears again, this time holding hands with a Quetzacoatl-plumed *Catarina Calavera*, or female death's-head dandy, the creation of revered Mexican satirist Posada, situated to her right. Rivera, in this instance dressed as he was the day he took his San Carlos Academy entrance exam, later described his pre-adolescent self in the Alamada Park as "dreaming of his ideal love" –Kahlo– who stands behind him, a maternal arm placed on his shoulder. With one significantly contrived exception, a 1930 lithomontage,[26] this is the only time he ever represented their bodies touching.

While, in the Hotel del Prado mural, Rivera outfits his ten-year-old incarnation with umbrella, pet snake and frog (one of Frida's many endearing names for him was *El Sapo-Rano*, the 'Frog-Toad', for obvious reasons), he places in her left hand a Chinese Yin-Yang symbol. This Eastern icon, also found throughout her diary, signifies the fated reconciliation of male/female, light/dark, life/death and all such contradictions. Central to the allegory of his own destiny –which Diego obviously visualized as intertwined with that of his country– Frida seems to play for him a salubrious and sheltering role.

In 1938, visiting French theorist André Breton tried to co-opt her as an exemplar of the potency of the European Surrealist movement. But Frida protested, "I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality".[27] Although it

[25] For identification of the figures in this mural, see *Sueño de una Tarde Dominical en la Alameda Central, Mural 50 Años 1947-1997* (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, Museo Mural Diego Rivera, 1997).

[26] I am referring to the double lithograph, *Autorretrato y desnudo de Frida* (Collection: INBA-MCG), cat. no. 894 in *Diego Rivera Catálogo General de Obra de Caballete* (Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1989). See Tibol, "An Exchange of Looks", 62.

[27] Quoted in *Time*, April 27, 1953, 90. See Sarah M. Lowe, *Frida Kahlo* (NY: Universe Publishing, 1991), 78-80.

had not yet been created, her version of herself as primary care-giver to her immature husband, the elaborately titled easel painting, *The Love-Embrace of the Universe, The Earth (Mexico), Diego, Me, and Mr. Xólotl* was the type of picture that must have inspired Breton to proclaim Kahlo a kindred spirit. The psychic and cosmological connotations of this work, painted about a year after Rivera's dream at the Alameda, are definitely more conflicted and disturbing than his somewhat egoistic utopianism. She too borrows from history painting, amalgamating Christian iconography and the symbols of other world religions when she equips Diego's fat, baby Jesus incarnation on her lap with fire and Buddha's third eye of wisdom. By also placing his grown-up image in the forehead position on her face, in several poignant self-portraits Frida traps Diego with her obsessive love. Thus she fulfills, pictorially at least, her father's queer prediction.[28]

An article published in *Novedades* in 1955 soon after her death shows that, like Rivera, Kahlo was adept at appropriating Marxist rhetoric when asked to characterize and praise her husband. Many additional comments on him in this essay are, not surprisingly, however, much more private and self-revelatory.

Sometimes her words virtually narrate the parallel texts of his own, rather more brutally honest, later easel self-portraits. For instance, she writes:

> With his Asiatic head above which his dark hair grows, so thin and fine that it seems to float in the air, Diego is a giant child, immense, of kind face and a slightly sad look. His bulging eyes, dark, very intelligent and huge, are constrained with difficulty –they are almost outside their orbits– because of swollen and protruding eyelids . . . The form of Diego is that of an affectionate monster, inspired by fear and hunger, created by the ancient concealer, a necessary and eternal element . . .[29]

La Gran Ocultadora was in fact one of his endearing pseudonyms for *her*.

Although, in depicting Kahlo through words and pictures, Rivera liked to pretend her meaning to Mexico was more important than their personal association, as Wolfe relates, after her probable suicide, "Diego became an old man in a few minutes -pale and ugly". An observer said that he scooped a handful of her ashes at her cremation and ate them,

[28] I am referring to Guillermo Kahlo's warning to Diego (cited earlier) that his daughter was *un demonio oculto*, quoted in March, 104.

[29] Kahlo, "Portrait of Diego", *Novedades*, July 17, 1955; reprinted in *Calyx* (Oct. 1960), 93.

demanding that his own be mixed with hers "molecule by molecule" (a request not granted, as he was buried with other Mexican heroes).[30]

In her now-famous journal, no doubt also referring by metaphor to her marriage, Frida Kahlo observed, "Only one mountain can know the core of another". Despite her protestations of primary allegiance to Communism (which increased in intensity as she became more ill), it should be evident that, for an orthodox Socialist, Kahlo was much too subjective and emotional about one individual, her husband. She surely understood, however –as did he– the power of the Marxist concept thesis/antithesis/synthesis, as the basis of dialectical transformation.

Performing themselves as they depicted each other obviously provided an essential avenue through which these two extraordinary fabulators could continuously transform and reconfigure the ongoing dialectic that fueled their sometimes tense, but always fascinating intimate and artistic relationship.

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[30] Wolfe, 400, is quoting Ella Parescu's recollection of Diego after Kahlo's death. For Diego's scooping of Frida's ashes, see Marnham, 311. After her death he wrote:

> July 13th, 1954, was the most tragic day of my life, I had lost my beloved Frida forever. Too late I realized that the most wonderful part of my life had been my love for Frida.