



Research Article

Sublimation of Physical and Psychical Trauma in the Painting of Frida Kahlo

Michelle Morin*

University of Paris V, Paris, France

Abstract

The painting work of Frida Kahlo is a diary and recounts events from the past (the marriage of her parents, the accident) and the present (her marriage with Diego Rivera, her miscarriage and the betrayal of Diego with her sister). Frida Kahlo takes her inspiration in the physical and psychical traumas of her life, but also happy events and family secrets and sublimate and elaborate them. My method is the same than Freud: pick up something in the painting and associate with the life of the creator.

Keywords

Applied Psychoanalysis, Physical Trauma, Psychical Trauma, Sublimation, Elaboration

1. Introduction

Freud asks himself where the creator goes to find his material. [4] For Frida Kahlo it is perfectly obvious her work is a diary and recounts events from her past and present life without transformation like in some dreams. [1] Most artists talk about it but in a disguised way.

The creator act for Frida Kahlo is a way to escape from physical pain, to process the physical and psychical trauma she has suffered. [14, 15].

Frida could have died in her accident at age eighteen because the bar who pierced her caused severe internal bleeding. After the operation, she survives and testifies an extraordinary instinct for life. She has to bear unbearable suffering that worsens during her lover's absence and improves upon his return.

The sequelae could have led to a disability status or a narcissistic withdrawal. This is not the case. She will return to a normal life which shows how mentally strong she is. Frida at age of six was struck by poliomyelitis and retains aftereffects:

a leg with an atrophied calf and a slight limp. She will mask them later by wearing Indian long skirts.

In a letter, she writes to her “novio” Alejandro, sent to Europe by his mother in order to distance him from this uninteresting party. She describes her suffering to elicit his pity and maintain connection with him even though they are strained.

What are the psychical effects of physical pain? To the physical pain, the psychical pain to see her lover far away is added. She thinks that she won't be able to walk again and stays in bed during nine months with the chest encased in a plaster cast.

A very intense pain can paralyze consciousness and mental work. [12, 13] Masochism is the guardian of survival not of life. Masochism constitutes an obstacle to psychic growth. The decision to paint is a turning point toward healing. She has been painting since several years and her father who is a photographer encourages her. Pictorial creation allows her to sublimate and process physical and psychical traumas.

*Correspondence: Michelle Morin (Michelle.morin75@orange.fr)

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Frida before the accident was considered as a cry baby. The character will change and she will find the physical and mental strength to survive and live intensely. Sexuality which she invested so much in certainly played a major role in her life.

2. Methods

I want to show through some work of Frida where she takes her inspiration, in the events of everyday life; of the past and in the fantasies and unconscious desires.

My method is the same than Freud. Pick up something in the painting (the sculpture or the writing) and associate with the life of the creator. [2-9].

3. Results

3.1. My Grand-parents, My Parents and I (1936)

This painting was painted when she was twenty-nine years old. Frida returned to Mexico after seven years spent in the States with her husband Diego Rivera who painted mural commissions.

In the work, she is a little girl of three years old. It is the wedding of her parents and there is a fetus in her mother's womb. Was the mother pregnant with her older sister on her wedding day? The marriage was in 1898 and Mathild the oldest was born in 1898. This hypothesis is possible. Frida reveals a family secret in her painting.

To the left above the Mexican land we see the maternal grand-parents: her grandfather has Indian origins and her grand-mother comes from a family of Spanish generals. To the right are the German paternal grand-parents over the Atlantic ocean. The paternal grand-mother has eye brows that meet at the nose like Frida.

Frida is naked in the patio of the blue house in front of her father thus highlighting the father's preference and oedipian desires.

Frida's mother seems to tower over her husband by a head. She is a strong willed women who scolds the maids and shopkeepers. She can neither read nor write but she can count. She teaches to her daughter how to sew, embroider, cook, run a household, a very traditional up bringing where the woman is a housewife at her husband's service.

3.2. The Broken Spine (1944)

At the age of thirty seven years old Frida represented the accident of her eighteen years, so nineteen years later when the pain reappears. This self-portrait shows her with a bear bust, a beautiful breast and a spine fractured in several places. A corset holds her up and nails driven all over the body symbolize the pain she experiences and has experienced. Tears are flowing from her eyes. It is the Mexican land and sky.

The accident took place in September 1925 when Frida was

eighteen years old. [10] She was at the back of a bus with her "novio" Alejandro. A tram crashed into the bus and crushed it, a metal bar pierced her pelvis. Alejandro took her in his arms. She underwent emergency surgery. One wonders if she will survive. Alejandro tells of three spine fractures, a broken collarbone, two broken ribs, eleven fractures of the right leg, the right foot is crushed and dislocated, a dislocated shoulder and a pelvis fractured in three places. We wonder how Frida was able to recover from this terrible accident. She survives and spends a month at the hospital, then two months at home, lying in a body cast.

She decides to paint and her mother had a special easel made for her with a mirror on the ceiling. Frida was painting before and her father encouraged her. She makes a beautiful self-portrait which reminds us Botticelli and the Italian painters and Modigliani. She offers it to her lover so that he will come to see her and tell her he loves her. But the mother of Alejandro thinks she is not a good match for her son and send him in Europe where he will stay eight months. Not only does Frida have to overcome her physical trauma but now also the psychological trauma of a major heart break.

We learn in a letter of Frida [11] that a Leonardo was born in September 1925, her son and Alejandro is the godfather. This suggest that Alejandro was the father and that he did not want to recognize the child and marry her. We can think that this event took place before the accident. We understand the repetition: to be pregnant before the wedding like her mother with her father.

Sublimation and artistic creation will allow her to overcome the physical trauma and the double trauma of loss of a lover and of their child. [14, 15].

3.3. Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera (1931)

She paints in 1931 a portrait of Diego and herself. Diego looks enormous and gigantic, Frida small and slim, reaching his shoulder. He is dressed in a brown suit and a bluish grey shirt without a tie. He is holding in his right hand a palette with brushes symbolizing his profession as a painter. Frida is wearing a long dark green dress with a large flounce at the bottom, a pre-Columbian necklace and a large red scarf with fringes. They look very serious and don't look like lovers. Frida holds the left hand of Diego with her right hand.

Diego is forty years old. It is obvious that Frida chose a man who has the same age as her father, an artist like him and her. [3] But his character is very different. Rivera is the artist the most praised and hated in Mexico. It is an insatiable worker. Like Frida he has a Spanish mother also Indian. He lived in Europe for fourteen years. He is interested in pre-Columbian art, rejects the European influence and favors Mexican inspiration. Married twice and father of two daughters he is a womanizer and he is interested in one of his models Lupe Marin.

They married on August 21, 1929. During the evening Diego got drunk. They fought, she came back home pouring tears and then went to live with Diego. Listen to the words of

Frida: "In my life I have been the victim of two major accidents the first in the bus... the second it is Diego.

Frida was in love with Diego. She admired the great muralist. He is tender and caring in his letters. She idealizes him and considers him like a child to protect. Several miscarriage seems to be after effects of the accident. Frida will have to mourn her desire for a child.

Frida accompanied her husband to the States where he had commissions for murals: San Francisco, New York, Detroit. It is to please her husband that she adopts Tehana dress and wear pre-Columbian jewels offered by Diego. This also allow her to hide her limp.

3.4. Henry Ford Hospital or the flying Bed 5 (1932)

In this painted work, Frida tells us about her miscarriage in Detroit July 1932.

Frida naked in her bed is bathed in her own blood. She is connected to five objects: a snail at the head of her bed, a male fetus and a gravid uterus on the right, a damaged pelvis, an orchid and an automobile engine on the left.

The snail is considered by Native Americans to be a symbol of fertilization, pregnancy and birth. The male fetus could be her desire of a boy. The uterus with a baby represents her pregnancy. The damage pelvis suggests her accident at age eighteen. The orchid could be the symbol of Diego. The automobile engine seems to be a node to the city of Detroit and the Ford factory.

Like in the night dream, Frida uses symbols to represent the miscarriage: the cause, the place, sexuality and relationship with Diego and her desire of child.[1].

3.5. A few Small Bites (1935)

Back to Mexico Frida and Diego moves into their twin houses of San Angel. Diego furious to be back in Mexico accuses Frida of forcing him to return. In reality, Diego refused to remove the figure of Lenin off his mural for Rockefeller in New York. It was an additional and intolerable provocation for an American millionaire. The masochistic behavior of Diego led to the destruction of the work and stopped the American orders.

Frida was inspired by a news item. A drunkard stabbed his mistress twenty times. Talking to the judge, he said: "But it was only a few small bites". The depiction of this sadistic scene reveals another one, what Frida has just experienced. Diego is cheating on her with her younger sister Cristina; a great friend for her. This murder represents both the harm Diego is doing to her and the death wishes she must feel towards him. She identifies with both the victim and the aggressor. She can also see it like a betrayal of her sister to which she makes no allusion.

The behavior of Diego is incestual, he has sex with the sister of his wife. He respects no taboo, no prohibition. It is also a

masochistic behavior that leads to the destruction of their marriage such as the one that led to the destruction of his work in New York and the loss of American orders, which allowed him to earn a living. Diego falls from his pedestal: he isn't any more the great muralist.

Frida is separating from Diego and considering divorce. They will divorce and Diego will ask Frida to join him in San Francisco and they will marry again!

We wonder how Frida can have been in love with such a man whose infidelity was known, a real womanizer, a Don Juan that seeks to seduce women and succeeds.

4. Discussion

Frida Kahlo takes her inspiration in the physical and psychological traumas of her life (accident, miscarriage, adultery) but also in the happy events (marriage) and family secrets.

Picasso says: "The work one does is a way of keeping a diary". The painter is perfectly aware that his work reflects his private life, his wives and mistresses (Fernande and the pink period, Olga from the virgin to the monstrous giants, Dora Maar and Guernica, Françoise Gilot and the flower woman) his children (Paolo, Maya) his friends (Casagemas and the blue period, Braque and the negro period, death of Cezanne and the cubist period).

Gauguin is in search of the lost paradise of his Peruvian childhood which he finds again with the Tahitian women.

Seraphine brings back to life her mother who was lost at the age of one in *the Daisies* which looks like a portrait without facial features.

Niki Saint Phalle reveals to us her sexual trauma, the incest with her father when she was eleven years old, in her book *My Secret* published at age sixty two. We find the trauma in her paintings (*Pink nude with dragon*) in sculptures (*Mouth of love* of the Stavinsky fountain) and the giant *Nana* with entry through the vagina at the Swedish exhibit and her movie (*Daddy*).

5. Conclusion

Artistic creation allows to represent consciously and unconsciously physical, sexual, psychical traumas, to sublimate and elaborate them. Frida Kahlo is totally conscious and she is a good example. Her creation like dream uses dramatization and symbolism.

With Frida Kahlo it is perfectly obvious her work is a diary and recounts events from her past and present life without transformation like in some dreams. Most artists talk about it but in a disguise way.

She talks about the past (the marriage of her parents, her grand-parents, the accident) about the present (her marriage with Diego, the miscarriage, Diego's betrayal with her sister.

This is applied psychoanalysis and Freud was the first to use it. [2-9].

Author Contributions

Michelle Morin: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing—original draft

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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