

This pack contains an information and activity booklet, for use in the gallery or classroom. It is designed to be used as a resource to accompany a visit to the Frida Kahlo exhibition at Tate Modern, or to support varied classroom projects.

Frida
9 June – 9 October 2005
Kahlo

Information and activity pack for teachers

Introduction

Frida Kahlo can be seen as one of the most significant artists of the twentieth century, not just in her native Mexico, but worldwide. Repeatedly painting her own image, she built up a body of work that explored her identity as a woman, artist, Mexican, disabled person and political activist. A remarkable range of self-portraits show how she constructed an image for herself, and, with her flamboyant Mexican costumes, jewellery and exotic pets, ultimately made herself into something of an icon. Other artworks reveal how she explored the pain she suffered from a spine injury and the difficulties of her relationship with Diego Rivera, the famous Mexican muralist whom she twice married. As well as taking inspiration from her own life, Kahlo drew upon a wide range of influences including Surrealism, ancient Aztec belief, popular Mexican folklore, eastern philosophy and medical imagery.

This teachers' pack has been produced to accompany the exhibition 'Frida Kahlo' at Tate Modern which is the first major UK exhibition dedicated to her work to take place for over twenty years. The pack is designed to both support a visit to the exhibition and to link with work that you are doing in the classroom. Alternatively, if you can't visit the exhibition, you can use the colour posters as a stimulus for your discussion.

Themes

The pack introduces pairs of work that can be looked at in conjunction, bringing up discussion of particular themes. Looking at the work of Frida Kahlo opens up a wide range of topics for study, such as thinking about portraits and identity, considering issues of disability, and exploring cross-cultural issues such as national identity. The pairs of works and themes are listed below. We hope this makes it easier for you to link a visit to the exhibition with themes that you are already studying back at school.

Belief Systems, Links with Nature

Love Embrace of the Universe

Roots

Constructing Identities

Self-Portrait with Monkey

Self-Portrait with Monkey and Parrot

Relationships, Politics, Constructing Identities

Frida and Diego Rivera

The Two Fridas

National Identities

Self-Portrait between the Border of Mexico and the United States

My Dress Hangs There

The Broken Body, Illness, Disability

The Broken Column

The Little Deer

Schemes of work

The following schemes of work are relevant to this pack:

- KS 1: 1A Self Portrait / 2B Mother Nature, Designer
KS 2: 3A Portraying Relationships / 6C A Sense of Place
KS3: 7A Self Image / 9A Life events
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Classroom activities

Note for all activities

Sketchbooks were an essential tool for Kahlo throughout her life; she used them as a place to doodle, play with colour, write and sketch. If you are able to make or bring sketchbooks for your gallery visit, we strongly recommend their use in the exhibition and in your classroom work afterwards. The classroom activity sections throughout this kit also give you further ideas for sketchbook activities that relate to particular works or themes.

Discussion or sketchbook elements of the classroom activities can also be carried out in the gallery.

For more information

Interesting books about Frida Kahlo are:

- 'Frida: The Biography of Frida Kahlo', Hayden Herrera, Bloomsbury, London, 2003
'Frida Kahlo: The Paintings', Hayden Herrera, Perennial, 2002
'Frida Kahlo' (exhibition catalogue), edited by Emma Dexter and Tanya Barson, Tate, London, 2005

In the exhibition concourse you will find several touchscreen computers that present a multimedia programme about aspects of Frida Kahlo's life and work. Elements of this programme are also available online at www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/kahlo/

Free

Instead of the usual audioguide to accompany the exhibition, visitors can take the Frida Kahlo Multimedia Tour. You will be given a handheld computer that will show you images and video clips as well as playing a range of audio commentaries about Kahlo's art and life.

Price £2.50

Booking Information

Please call the group booking line on 020 7887 3959. Free entry for students under the age of 18.

The Love Embrace / Roots

The Love Embrace of the Universe, the Earth (Mexico), Myself, Diego and Señor Xolotl 1949

This intriguing painting has been understood as representing Kahlo's search for a system of belief and method for understanding the world. While her early works are defined by references to Christianity and Aztec beliefs, in later life she broadened out to combine various different religious, ideological and philosophical belief systems. Marxist ideology became progressively important, but this was accompanied by an interest in Eastern mysticism, Hinduism and Buddhism. Various of her drawings include symbols from eastern religion and mysticism such as the third eye motif and the Yin-Yang symbol, while the word karma appears in drawings and in the painting 'The Little Deer' 1946.

The changing relationship between Kahlo and Rivera is also apparent in this painting. As time passed by she took an increasingly maternal role, perhaps as a way of mediating the pain caused by his sexual liaisons, which she could treat as the naughty behaviour of a child. Kahlo recorded these maternal feelings in her diary, at one point writing how 'at every moment he is my child, my child born every moment, diary, from myself'. She depicted Rivera frequently in her work, on a number of occasions giving him a third, all-seeing eye in the centre of his forehead to signify his special creative powers.

'The Love Embrace' is a work which celebrates the final resolution of the Riveras' marriage. Kahlo pictures herself as earth mother, holding the child she was unable to bear. The 'love embrace' refers not only to this maternal encircling but also to a series of other embraces which root them in the Mexican earth and in what has been described by Kahlo's biographer, Hayden Herrera, as the 'ancient dark/light duality of a Pre-Columbian universe'. Nestling in the right wrist of the universe is Kahlo's dog Xolotl, guarding the couple. This dog is more than a representation of the artist's pet dog; the creature also represents the Mexican xolotl, a being in the form of a dog who guards the realm of the dead in ancient Mexican mythology, in which the dead are carried on his back and into the underworld, where they are resurrected. At first glance it is easy to see the portrait as a sublime interlocking pyramid of love. But a closer look reveals tears dotting Kahlo's cheeks, blood spurting from her heart and a bright red gash across her neck and chest. As if in sympathy, and drawing on the synthesis Kahlo often presented in her work of herself fusing with the land, the Mexican earth has a cracked breast from which a single drop of milk appears. The baby Diego holds an orange plant known as maguey, which in its fire-like quality can be understood as symbolic of his genius, rooted in the Mexican soil. The third eye in his forehead is the invisible eye of oriental wisdom. Yet despite her great love of Diego, Kahlo knew that she could never own him, writing in her diary that, 'He never was nor ever will be mine. He belongs to himself', with characteristic self-knowledge.

Roots 1943

The bringing together of self with the elemental forces and qualities of the natural world is a recurrent theme in Kahlo's oeuvre. She explored her identity in relation to nature, articulating a profound affinity with the natural world. This affinity found expression in works in which she pictures herself as a hybrid creature, merging with plants, animals and other beings. In addition, she drew on non-western ideas about being and existence, moving from initially focusing on Pre-Columbian beliefs in early work to later explorations of Hindu and Oriental creeds. Up until the 1930s, she depicted herself *with* plants and animals, but later, in the 1940s, she began to depict herself as plant or animal, for example in the 1943 painting 'Roots' in which she metamorphoses into a plant. The device of picturing herself as animal and plant hybrids not only suggests affinity with nature but also serves to situate herself within cultural and religious creeds, for example in 'The Wounded Deer', 1946 the deer is significant in Aztec symbolism. It is worth remembering Kahlo's early interest in biology, botany and social sciences which she studied whilst at the Preparatoria, the national prep school for Mexico University.

This weaving of hybrid identities and fantasy-like explorations of self has caused Kahlo's work to be described as Mexican Surrealist. However, while the Surrealists found much in her work that held affinities with their own, she never wholly subscribed to its philosophy, and didn't mince her words in saying so, describing her opinion of Paris and the Surrealists in a letter which emphasised her distance from them; 'I would rather sit on the floor of the market of Toluca and sell tortillas, than to have anything to do with those 'artistic' bitches of Paris'. It is likely that she found the dictates of Surrealism too confining for her work. After a visit to Mexico in 1938 in which Andre Breton described her paintings as 'a ribbon around a bomb' he proposed an exhibition in Paris which Marcel Duchamp helped her organise. In her dealings with the Surrealists, Kahlo described Duchamp as 'the only one who has his feet on the earth...' Perhaps in Duchamp's alter-ego, for which he adopted the name Rose Selavy ('eros, c'est la vie', meaning 'love is life') we can see a precursor to Kahlo's own blurring of gender in 'Self Portrait with Cropped Hair', 1940 (not in the exhibition). Despite Kahlo's assertion that 'I never knew I was a Surrealist until Andre Breton came to Mexico and told me I was', and that 'I paint always what passes through my head without any other consideration', and despite her carefully cultivated image of herself as a self-taught, naïve artist with roots in popular Mexican art, she would have been familiar with developments in the Mexican and European avant-garde since her days at the Preparatoria.

The Love Embrace / Roots

For discussion

- Discuss how Kahlo has made links between human beings and the natural world in both these paintings.
- Ask pupils to describe how they understand the significance of the different elements of the paintings, for example the dog and the maguey plant.
- Why has Kahlo chosen to represent both night and day in 'The Love Embrace'?
- Discuss the composition of the paintings and how she has achieved a sense of balance. Think about the use of colour and other formal elements such as perspective.

Links to other works

Pupils could explore the works of twentieth-century European Surrealists such as Max Ernst (who had his own animal alter ego, a bird named Lop Lop) or more contemporary surrealist artists such as Louise Bourgeois, to extend their understandings of how the unreal, the imaginary and the fantastic have been explored in western art.

Kahlo is not alone in using her work as a vehicle for expressing and exploring different ways of understanding the world and the profundities of life and death. Last year's Turner Prize short-list featured Turkish artist Kutlag Ataman, whose work 'Twelve', 2004 shows six individuals recounting their experience of reincarnation. It was filmed in south-east Turkey, near the border with Syria, in an Arab community trying to make sense of horrific loss. They accept as a fact that everyone is reborn, although only those who have suffered violent or untimely death remember their past lives.

Classroom activities

Primary

Making a living and growing group portrait

Tending plants, flowers and vegetables and cooking were all important parts of Kahlo's aesthetic life, and her choice of vibrant colour or strong flavour was part of her cultural heritage. If possible choose a small garden area at school or else find pots for the play area/assembly hall/foyer welcome area. As a group, choose and plant a range of seeds, flowers, plants or vegetables according to the season and what is feasible! If it is possible to have a small planted area or garden you might want to expand your ideas to perhaps making a group portrait with each child choosing favourite colours or types of plant. You might want to be inspired by dominant colours in Kahlo's work, for example green, red, yellow/gold.

Possible plants or vegetables to include could be:

- salad rocket (quick and easy to harvest)
- poppies (with the added bonus of our connotations of memory)
- sunflowers
- runner beans

With many parents interested in plants, growing vegetables or perhaps renting allotments, this could also be an opportunity to bring in a multicultural dimension through the range of seeds chosen, for example types of okra, squash or spinach. Build into your growing and harvesting an opportunity to paint and cook the resulting feast, with an invited audience of parents, friends, colleagues etc! Watching the initial stages, and then drawing, writing and recording these creative growth stages can all be documented in sketchbooks.

Secondary

Classroom research activity

Kahlo made links between the Mexican countryside and landscape and the experience of her own body as a woman. For Kahlo, the blood in 'Roots' referred to her own experience of illness, but also to her feelings of identity as a Mexican artist.

After looking at the two paintings featured here, explore the ideas that are raised by Kahlo's work by suggesting other artists who have worked in this way. Examples include:

- The metaphor of the tree of life and the Green Man as a symbol of humanity and nature crosses many cultures.
- Artists throughout the world have frequently used their exploration of landscape as further aspects of their own identities (see Richard Long as a contemporary British example).
- Ana Mendieta, born in Cuba and then worked in USA in the 1960s, literally worked with and on the land when she modelled her body in the land around Iowa from mud, moss, flowers or snow.

Frida And Diego Rivera / The Two Fridas

Frida and Diego Rivera 1931

Kahlo is often cited as claiming that 'two accidents' shaped her life: first, the bus crash of 1925 which nearly killed her, and second, 'Diego'. That this tumultuous relationship impacted hugely on her life and artistic career is undeniable. She first met Diego Rivera while she was a student at the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria, where he was painting a mural in the auditorium. After her accident, Kahlo sought advice from Rivera on the possibility of an artistic career. Soon their mutual admiration turned to love and they were married in 1929. He was the most famous artist in Mexico when they married, and one of the big three of the muralist movement, with Jose Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siquieros. Over the course of their life together and through his stature Kahlo met many famous avant-garde artists, writers and political figures.

In 'Frida and Diego Rivera', 1931, she presents herself as the demure Mexican wife, the paradigmatic Mexican woman, with Diego who is presented as the Great Artist, holding a palette and brushes – the tools of his trade. Frida is wearing traditional Mexican costume. Questions of national and cultural identity were of great concern to Kahlo; throughout her adult life she donned the colourful costume of the Tehuanas (a generalised term that refers to the women of the Tehuantepec, a region towards the south-west of Mexico). While in part this was to please Rivera, in the main it was a political and cultural statement, as in the post-revolutionary period the Tehuana came to represent an authentic and independent indigenous Mexican cultural heritage in which the women were courageous and indomitable. However, as art historian Oriana Baddely suggests, the wise viewer is sensitive to issues of cultural stereotyping and commodification of ethnic identity so prevalent in discussions of Kahlo, keeping hold of the sense of irony and playfulness in her work.

The course of love was not to run smooth; Kahlo divorced Diego in November 1939 and remarried him in December 1940. Their marriage had been tainted by Diego's womanising, the most devastating of his affairs being with Kahlo's sister Cristina in the mid-1930s. When they remarried, it was on the understanding of no further marital relations.

The Two Fridas 1939

'The Two Fridas', painted at the time of Kahlo and Rivera's divorce, was exhibited at the International Exhibition of Surrealism held in Mexico City in 1940. One of Kahlo's best known paintings, it was made for a public audience and deals directly with the interaction of her private pains and a political ideology. The work depicts two almost life-size Fridas, seated, both self-portraits. They are presented equally with a clear sense of formal balance. Both sit stiffly, staring out at the viewer with a mix of pride and despair so

Frida And Diego Rivera / The Two Fridas

common in the expressive language of Kahlo's portraits. On the viewer's left is Frida in a colonial-style costume; her white dress with its echoes of a Victorian wedding dress is spotted with blood dripping from the vein held closed by the surgical scissors in her right hand. Her left hand is clasped over the hand of her other self, the Tehuana-clothed Mexican Frida. It is this Frida, the artist said, that Diego loved, whilst the colonial Frida is his rejected wife.

Both hearts are extracted, a device to show pain that she also used in the painting 'Memory', 1937 (not in the exhibition), which has been said expresses Kahlo's pain over Diego's earlier affair with her sister. In 'The Two Fridas' the unloved Frida's heart is broken whilst the other Frida's heart is whole. The hearts are linked by a vein, expressing the links between the two different sides to Frida's character. The Tehuana Frida also holds a miniature portrait of Diego as a boy which links to the unloved Frida by another vein, which drips blood onto the white dress of the unloved Frida.

The two Fridas are set against a tumultuous sky which hints at the artist's inner turmoil. However the figures are not integrated with the landscape behind them; they relate only to one another, emphasising Kahlo's reliance on herself alone.

Kahlo's work often refers to powerful mythologies of Mexican identity; the Tehuana woman represented for Kahlo a new positive future of a postcolonial state. The political message of this painting suggests that through adopting an anti-colonial position, a healing of the pains of the past can take place. In the analogy of self and nation, Kahlo characterises her own emotional and physical problems as symptomatic of the post-colonial condition. Thus the European-style wedding gown and the Tehuana dress of the 'The Two Fridas' reflect ideological positions as much as the historical realities of Mexico's past. The twin Fridas are the embodiment of the conflict implicit in mestizo culture, neither fully Indian nor European. It is by means of political choice, represented in Kahlo's paintings through clothing, that revolutionary change becomes possible. Kahlo was deeply concerned with her heritage and the fact of her parents mixed blood: her mother was a Mexican mestiza and her father a Hungarian-German immigrant. This blood heritage is at the root of her split identification on the one hand with Mexican popular and indigenous culture and on the other with European culture.

Alongside questions of cultural identity, Kahlo's work also explores the manifold and various female identities prevalent in Mexican cultural paradigms. These include La Malinche, the indigenous Nahuatl mistress and translator for conquistador Cortes who overthrew the Aztec empire and claimed Mexico for Spain. Reviled as a traitor, and duplicitous woman, she gave birth to Cortes' son and is seen as a symbol of the origin of Mexican culture. Her crimes are viewed as being on a par with Christianity's concept of original sin. Kahlo identified with tainted heroines such as La Malinche, signing letters 'Frida, la Malinche' and painting herself in a Malinche mask.

Frida And Diego Rivera / The Two Fridas

For discussion

- Although symbols and stereotypes of femininity abound in her work, Kahlo's expressions of ambiguity and her tendency to cross-dress work to undermine such stereotypes. Even when she adopted the stereotypical cultural role of Tehuana, she did so knowingly. This was significant within Mexican culture which was forcefully macho. Playing around with and challenging female stereotypes has been one of the major themes in work by women artists in the second half of the twentieth century, against which Kahlo needs to be understood as an avant-garde force for change. Discuss with pupils whether they think stereotypical ideas about femininity and masculinity persist today, and how Kahlo challenges such ideas in her work, for example exaggerating features such as her eyebrows and moustache, or in Diego's case, drawing attention to the feminine curve of his belly.
- For Kahlo, each day was in its own way a political performance through the significance of the Tehuana dress, jewellery and hairstyle that she adopted. Discuss with pupils the importance of dress, of costume and national identity.

Links to other works

Tracey Emin *Everyone I Ever Slept With* 1963-95

When considering Kahlo's personal life and relationships, there are fertile links to be made between her work and that of British artist Tracey Emin. Her work 'Everyone I Ever Slept With', (sadly destroyed by the Momart warehouse fire in 2004) recorded by stitching on the inside of a tent, the names of everyone, as the title states, she had ever shared a bed with.

Sarah Lucas *Self Portrait Eating a Banana* 1990

This work by Lucas challenges ideas about femininity by adopting a traditionally masculine stance.

Classroom activities

Primary

Making mood masks

Looking at the painting of Frida and Diego, introduce the idea of how we behave differently, depending on our relationships with other people, (for example how we are with our friend is different than with one's manager, teacher etc). Ask the group to notice the body language of both Frida and Diego in the portrait of 1931. How do we think Frida might have been feeling? What do we look like when we feel shy or not very confident or are trying some new skill?

If appropriate to the age of the group, then look at 'The Two Fridas' and discuss why she has shown herself twice, what are the differences in her clothes and what she is doing. A simple mask-making activity can explore this idea of how we contain a mix of feelings in one person. Ask the group to identify a range of feelings which they have experienced in the last week (for example, shy/confident/happy/sad/angry/calm). Brainstorm colours or

shapes that could describe both these moods and the opposite feelings. You might want to look at the background of stormy clouds that Frida Kahlo chose for her double self-portrait as an idea to help with this. To make the masks, either use flat card on an ice-lolly stick to give a front and back shape or papier-mâché on a balloon which is then dried and the balloon form carefully cut in half to give a front and back. In either case ask the group to draw a sketch in advance of what colours or shapes will express a mood and the opposite feeling. It may be appropriate to display or present these masks as part of an assembly or performance.

Secondary

Portraying relationships

Look at the two paintings to explore the idea of how Frida Kahlo showed difficult relationships in her work. Kahlo was often confrontational and direct in her portrayal of arguments with Diego and her own mixed feelings. This can be very resonant for adolescents so it may be appropriate here to develop private sketchbook work, explaining this was a form used by Kahlo and other artists to record messy ideas and feelings!

Ask students to notice Kahlo's use of body language and clothing and how these change in the two paintings discussed here. Then ask the students to record in their sketchbooks for the next week what clothes they wear and in what situations (for example note contrasts between Monday morning 10am, Saturday evening 8pm and Sunday afternoon 3pm.) They might want to add information about where they were, who they were with, how they felt. If possible, keep this record for yourself too!

A week later, discuss findings and contrast these diary/sketchbook notes with how clothes are presented in fashion/music advertising, where everyone always looks cool, confident, happy etc. It may be helpful to make links with the contemporary work of Tracy Emin and discuss how cross her artwork 'The Bed', 1998/9, made many people annoyed by showing intimacy, mess and female sexuality.

Self-Portrait On The Border Line Between Mexico And The United States / My Dress Hangs There

Self-Portrait on the Border Line Between Mexico and the United States 1932

During a stay in North America with Rivera in 1932-33, Kahlo painted 'Self-Portrait on the Border Line Between Mexico and the United States'. Rivera had been commissioned to produce murals for the Detroit Institute of Arts depicting the Ford production line at the River Rouge factory, and he grew increasingly enthralled with modern machinery and all that it was capable of. Frida however did not share his enthusiasm and spent most of her time in Detroit wishing she was back in her familiar, agrarian Mexico. 'Self-Portrait on the Border Line' shows the contrast that she saw between the land in which she was born and the more developed, industrial and technological USA.

Mexico is on the left of the painting and the US is on the right. The Frida of the portrait is standing on the boundary that marks the border between the two countries. Unlike the majority of her self-portraits in which she dresses as Tehuana, here she presents herself in rather frilly pink dress and lace gloves. However, most significantly, she clasps a small Mexican flag, which shows where her loyalty lies. The stone she stands upon is inscribed 'Carmen Rivera painted her portrait in 1932'. We can only speculate on her choice to use her Christian name and her husband's last name; perhaps as part of a pretence of being proper, an ironic nod to modest wifely identity which the press at the time used, disingenuously describing her as Rivera's 'petite wife who sometimes dabbled in paint'.

The fecund Mexican landscape draws a stark contrast with a technologically arid and technology-dominated North America. In the Mexican side of the painting, a fire-spitting sun and a quarter moon are enclosed in cumulus clouds, which when they touch create a bolt of lightning over a partially ruined Pre-Columbian temple. The landscape is littered with a pile of rubble, a skull and Pre-Columbian fertility symbols. By contrast, a single cloud over North America is nothing but industrial smoke from four chimney stacks from the Ford factory at River Rouge. Instead of encompassing the sun and moon, this smoke cloud dirties the American flag, whose artificial stars are a poor contrast to Mexico's real sun and real moon. Bleak skyscrapers also dominate the landscape of North America, in contrast with Mexico's cultural history expressed by the temple on the Mexican side of the painting. Kahlo makes a comparison between Mexico's blossoming exotic plants, on the bottom left, and the cold and functional electrical appliances on the US side at the bottom right.

The machine nearest Frida has two cords. One connects with the Mexican lily's white roots, the other is plugged in to the US side of the border marker, which serves as her pedestal. But which way does the power flow? While this work makes clear her ambivalent feelings about capitalist society represented by North America, it also draws attention to the politics

Self-Portrait On The Border Line Between Mexico And The United States / My Dress Hangs There

of identity in post-colonial debates. Biographer Hayden Herrera writes of how, 'For Kahlo the personal became elided with the public sphere. Her body and experiences were used metaphorically to debate wider issues that were central to Mexican cultural politics'.

My Dress Hangs There 1933

Frida's feelings about North America and capitalist society are most clearly presented in 'My Dress Hangs There' of 1933. While Diego was at work on his Rockefeller Center mural (left unfinished and later destroyed because Nelson Rockefeller objected to the inclusion of Lenin's portrait), Frida produced this painting. It is typical of the contrast between Rivera and Kahlo's work: while Rivera took the broad view, contrasting evils of capitalism with a Marxist utopia, Kahlo painted a personal, sardonic view of New York in the Depression years, with her own Tehuana dress in the middle. Crammed with details in a primitive form of synthetic cubism, the work contains fragments of newspaper photographs of breadlines, a military parade, the audience at a baseball game and political demonstrations. The steps of Federal Hall, presided over by a statue of George Washington, are made out of a collaged graph showing 'weekly sales in millions'.

Kahlo pokes fun at American values – in this case sports and plumbing – by setting a golf trophy and a toilet on top of classical columns. She also warns against the commercialisation of sex seen by the sex goddess Mae West (whom Diego adored) who is vamping from a tired and peeling billboard above buildings going up in flames. Conspicuous waste is derided by the garbage pail stuffed with detritus including, rather unnervingly, a human hand. Suspended between the toilet and the trophy, Kahlo's Tehuana dress hangs empty. Disgusted at the contrast between rich and poor in North America, she wanted to flee to Mexico, a longing perhaps hinted at by the collaged steamship chugging out of New York Harbour past the Statue of Liberty.

For discussion

- By careful analysis of the objects and references included in the paintings, work out what Kahlo's views are on both Mexico and the United States of America.
- How does Kahlo make her argument in these paintings (for example, use of formal devices such as composition, contrast).
- Discuss how she includes her own personality in the painting?
- What is she suggesting about technology? Do pupils agree?
- In the future, what do pupils consider the monuments of twenty-first century western civilisation will be? (For example motorways.) What will they tell future archaeologists about our time?

Self-Portrait On The Border Line Between Mexico And The United States / My Dress Hangs There

Links to other works

The politics of national identity are rich themes to explore, for example in the work of contemporary artist Yinka Shonibare shortlisted for the Turner Prize in 2004. Born in London, Shonibare grew up in his parents' native Nigeria and returned to London to study fine art at the Byram Shaw College of art and Goldsmiths College. His position as both insider and outsider in the cultures he straddles is crucial to his work. Shonibare parodies European culture and cultural works in photographic tableaux and three-dimensional sculpted figures, dressed in or made of such 'traditional African' fabrics as batik, which actually originated in Indonesia and was exported around the world by Dutch and British colonists, and which the artist now buys at Brixton market in south London. But Shonibare does not use parody for its own sake. He is interested in the resonances of combinations of seemingly incompatible elements within a strong western tradition. See www.tate.org.uk/turnerprize/recent for further information.

Look at the work of contemporary photographer Marin Parr to extend the discussion on national identity. Parr's work often explore the concept of 'Englishness', showing such typically English pastimes as seaside trips, capturing both the everyday experience but also the wider issue of the politics of identity.

Classroom activities

These works both explore aspects of dual heritage as experienced by Frida Kahlo as an artist proud of Mexican tradition but part of an international art scene with a particular link to America.

These works also explore personal aspects of style and national identity, through clothing and domestic furniture, architecture and technology.

Primary

Mixing cultural contexts

Begin by discussion with pupils how we mix styles and cultures in our dress codes (for example sari and cardigan, hijab and trainers, eastern influence embroidery on teeshirts etc.). Discuss these mixtures of styles and particular times and places where one style might be preferred to another (for example sari at a family wedding, jeans in the evening). Use photography to document each student's favourite clothes or combination of styles. These photos can be added to previous works in this pack exploring self portraiture, or used to develop another layer of ideas about national identity.

In these two paintings Kahlo is also making a point about the values of different cultures and societies by contrasting the rubbish and waste of New York with, in 'My Dress Hangs There', her Mexican Tehuana dress hanging on a line between the western-style toilet and the golf club trophy.

In 'My Dress Hangs There' notice how Kahlo uses photographic collages

Self-Portrait On The Border Line Between Mexico And The United States / My Dress Hangs There

of pictures of crowds at the base of the painting. Are there extra pieces of information that students want to add to their portraits to express their ideas about London, or their home area? Frida Kahlo has shown a boat leaving New York, perhaps heading to Mexico. Can the students remember a time or place where they felt homesick? Who or what did they miss? What pictures can show this? Remember that collecting collage materials (Kahlo used newspapers) for use in paintings was an activity that many artists use (including Picasso and Schwitters, working during the same period as Kahlo). Include a session of finding useful collage materials to extend the photo-portraits (for example dried flowers, leaves, scans of favourite objects).

Secondary

Exploring cultural identity through personal objects

These two artworks are complex in their level of detail and symbolism. Make time for detailed discussion of the types of symbol included, ranging from electrical technology and historical Mexican artefacts in 'Self Portrait at the Border between Mexico and the United States' to the dense layering of ideas from the celebrity of Mae West to the poverty of the Great Depression in 'My Dress Hangs There'.

If you are using sketchbooks for these activities, this activity could extend previous work or could stand alone.

Using the two artworks as a starting point, ask the students to each think about three objects that are important to them from their own lives. These could be family photos, music CDs, jewellery, mobile phone etc. Ask each student to write, draw or photograph these objects. Then ask them to add two more objects that would describe their lives to someone from another country who had never met them before. For example, it could be a map of London, a flag of Pakistan or a photo of an important place. Again, these can be in the form of drawings, writing or photos. Then ask each student to present these five objects to each other in pairs, discussing how they can be best represented to give a sense of the individual who has chosen them.

Work on a finished piece through one of the chosen media (writing, drawing or photography). The students may wish to add references to other aspects of their lives and interests, for example music, the environment or green politics, sport, dance etc. All of these will contribute to the idea of multiple identities that fascinated Kahlo in her own art practice.

Self-Portrait with Monkey / Self-Portrait with Monkey and Parrot

Self-Portrait with Monkey 1938

Self-Portrait with Monkey and Parrot 1942

Who was Frida Kahlo? It is not possible to find an exact answer. So contradictory and multiple was the personality of this woman, that it may be said that many Fridas existed. Perhaps none of them was the one she wanted to be.' Alejandra Gómez Arias

Frida was adept at creating a façade behind which to hide her real self. She was nicknamed by Rivera and her closest friends as *la gran ocultadora* – 'the great concealer'. However the main type of painting she produced throughout her life were self-portraits, where you may imagine she would be revealing aspects of her character to her viewers. She indeed explored many issues about her life and feelings through her work, but in the beautifully painted and closely observed self-portraits of just her head and shoulders that we focus on in this section, we notice a similar pattern emerging again and again. She scrutinised her features and obsessively reproduced them, but as hard as we look we are unable to find out who is the real Frida Kahlo behind the mask that she created. She dressed in a flamboyant-style Mexican costume, wore her hair adorned with ribbons and flowers, creating a look that is immediately recognisable as Kahlo but not of a person that is showing a range of emotions and experiences. The Frida Kahlo we see in her self-portraits is always the same, like a photograph in which the identity of the sitter is all that needs to be portrayed rather than any deeper aspects of their character.

In the two self-portraits reproduced here, Kahlo looks slightly over her right shoulder but looks straight at the viewer, as she does in most of her paintings. She is unsmiling and strong, with nothing to be seen that hints at her damaged body. Against a jungle-like background and accompanied by her unusual pets, she portrays exoticism, strength and individuality.

There are many more photographs of Frida Kahlo than there are self-portraits; look at for example the images the two images shown here. Again Kahlo makes every effort to show herself in a particular way – unsmiling, three-quarter profile, wearing her Tehuana costume. She is rarely seen smiling or exhibiting emotion. However she has no self-consciousness in front of the camera, perhaps because she was used to her photographer father taking shots of her from an early age. Her self-portraits and the photographs that were taken of her show the self that she wanted to portray to the public – a self that she has created so successfully that is almost as if she has been performing, with the self-portraits and photographs documenting the performance that is being Frida Kahlo. Indeed it has been said that Frida Kahlo can be seen as one of the first performance

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artists, and it's interesting to look at her work alongside artists such as Claude Cahun or, more recently, Cindy Sherman (see links section below).

Kahlo's experiences and views were explored through other paintings she made, such a depiction of the pain felt due to her damaged spine in 'The Broken Column', 1944, and the distress she felt because of one of her miscarriages in 'Henry Ford Hospital', 1932. In other self-portraits she sometimes drew attention to her androgynous nature, painting herself in a man's suit, with her hair being cut short in a self-portrait she made after her divorce from Rivera ('Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair' 1940 (not in exhibition)).

There are some aspects to Kahlo's self-portraits that can be analysed further, such as the items she chose to include in the painting alongside her. She often depicted herself in front of an exotic leafy background, with her pet monkeys or parrots next to her. During the period of her divorce from Diego Rivera she often replaced her usual dramatic Mexican jewellery with ribbons, necklaces, thorns or animal's arms around her neck, threatening to choke her. In 'Self-Portrait with Monkey', 1938, her pet monkey's arm is elongated to stretch round her neck, making her familiar and friendly pet seem menacing.

The monkeys that inhabit her self-portraits may have been intended to have a sexual reference. Kahlo wanted to be free and uninhibited about sex and monkeys can be seen to symbolise lust.

Monkeys also represent companionship and may have replaced for Frida the children she never had. Her accident as a teenager had left her with a damaged pelvis which made it impossible for her to carry a pregnancy to full-term. In many self-portraits, Kahlo binds her pets to herself with silk ribbons, making the connection between them stronger, as ribbons represent life-lines for her.

Kahlo's Mexican costume was derived from the Tehuana people in Mexico, who had a particularly strong matriarchal culture with women being responsible for trade and men doing menial work. Frida would have been intrigued by this society, and her choice to wear their costume helps us to discover how she wanted herself to be seen by others. She was deeply immersed in Mexican culture and, along with Rivera, collected Meso-American (Pre-Colombian) sculptures and jewellery which adorned their house. Their walls were also covered in ex-voto or retablo paintings, which are traditional Mexican folk paintings that offer a prayer for salvation or thanks for divine intervention. In many of Kahlo's paintings we can find evidence of her inspiration from Mexican folk art of this kind, for example in the small size, bright colours and intricately painted details of her self-portraits. Perhaps they can be seen as religious icons for Kahlo herself and others to worship; it has been said that Kahlo's self-portraits are like magic talismans as by contemplating them one could cure one's own suffering.

Alongside her interest in Mexican peasant life of the past and present,

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Kahlo's politics were Communist, which is all a contrast to her own relatively well-off and middle class upbringing. Although she was undeniably immersed in all things Mexican, she would have been familiar with the western artworld with its new modern movements such as Surrealism, Futurism and Cubism.

Kahlo wasn't a particularly well-known artist during her lifetime; it was her husband, Diego Rivera, who was the celebrated Mexican muralist and was the most famous out of their partnership in the early 20th century. However in the last three decades Kahlo has become an icon in the artworld and beyond, with her work selling for large sums of money and her reputation well surpassing Rivera's. Viewers must identify with Kahlo and her ways of portraying herself, as well as her ground-breaking attempts to express experiences of being a woman that had not been seen before. In the context of her self-portraits, the dramatic look she created for herself and the magnetic force of the personality she wanted to portray are repeated again and again. If you visit the exhibition at Tate Modern you will see that all the bust-length self-portraits of Frida are displayed together, making manifest the extraordinary creation of Frida Kahlo, by Frida Kahlo herself.

For discussion

These questions can be asked about any of the self-portraits.

- Describe Kahlo's pose and expression. What might this tell you about her character?
- Where does Kahlo's gaze rest in this image? What might she be focusing on?
- What are the links between Kahlo herself and the objects she has included in the painting? And what about the background? Why do you think she has chosen to include such objects or to show herself against such a backdrop?
- Who do you think Kahlo made have made this self-portrait for? For example do you think she had someone in mind when she painted it, or do you think she painted it for herself? Or perhaps you think the viewer does not matter to Kahlo?
- Look at a series of Frida Kahlo self-portraits and make notes of the key things she uses to depict herself and to reveal what she chooses about her personality (for example her hairstyle, clothing, objects included in the painting). How often does she include the same items in her self-portraits? Can you see a pattern emerging?

Links to other works

Cindy Sherman *Bus Riders* 1976/2000 and *Untitled Film Stills* 1977-80
You could also ask 'who is the real Cindy Sherman' when looking at the photographic series 'Bus Riders' or 'Untitled Film Stills'. Unlike Kahlo however, Sherman shows herself as a different person in each photograph, explicitly

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playing a part and exploring what it is to construct an identity. Kahlo creates her own singular image in her self-portraits, using the same props again and again to show us the performance that is involved in being Frida Kahlo, but we can still ask questions about the real woman that is concealed underneath.

Andy Warhol *Marilyn Diptych* 1962

Warhol emphasises key features belonging to Marilyn Monroe (red lips, blonde hair, repeated imagery which refers to how many times her photograph was taken), emphasising the elements that are put together to make the image of the person 'Marilyn Monroe'. It's interesting to compare images such as this, as well as photographs of Marilyn Monroe, to Kahlo's own self-portraits where she repeatedly shows the same aspects of herself and her look.

Classroom activities

Primary

Making a self-portrait collage

Discuss Kahlo's choice of jewellery in this painting and in her other self-portraits. Notice her choice of animals, birds or wildlife in her self-portraits and what these choices say about her as a person. Brainstorm the favourite jewellery, food and animals of class members. Decide if any of these are safe to bring to school! If not, ask students to draw favourite items at home and bring to school to incorporate in their own self-portrait. Perhaps this self-portrait will change according to the seasons, for example a student may choose to show themselves encircled by mangoes in the summer season and a favourite cap/jacket/scarf in the winter. What makes each of the group special in their choices of jewellery, food or animals to accompany their self-portrait? Discuss with the group the use of collage (perhaps pictures of animals) as a means of building up this self-portrait, giving layers to the self-image.

Secondary

Making a self-portrait that explores cultural identity

Ask the students to consider the choices made by Kahlo in showing herself and also her own cultural identity. How can students express their own identity? For example this may be through a choice of Yoruba fabric in their portrait, the use of Jamaican colours or the inclusion of a Sikh bracelet. Remember that Kahlo's father was German and her mother Mexican so she was making sense of many mixed cultural identities in her own artwork. As a woman with a disability she also wanted to represent herself in strong, visible ways when at times she felt vulnerable and invisible.

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Brainstorm a list of favourite food, music or colours as the start to representing oneself. Then look at how she places herself centrally, surrounded by these other choices and aspects that represent her. Ask the students to choose how to place themselves in relation to their selected favourites. These choices could surround the portrait, but also offer the possibility that the self-portrait could be a piece of writing or music, rather than a painting. Kahlo often used popular culture in her own work, ranging from current local songs to traditional Mexican sayings or using Day of the Dead skeleton imagery to create a contrast to the vitality and colour of her paintings.

The Broken Column / The Little Deer

The Broken Column 1944

'I have suffered two serious accidents in my life, one in which a streetcar ran over me... The other accident is Diego.' Frida Kahlo

The first accident Frida Kahlo refers to left her spine so badly damaged that she would be in pain for the rest of her life. Indeed it was thought she may not survive after the accident, in which the bus she was travelling in collided with a street car, causing a handrail on the bus to pierce through Kahlo's spine and abdomen. She had to remain in bed for nearly two years after this accident and it changed her life in many ways, forcing her to give up her plans to study medicine and instead begin to paint as something to occupy her whilst unable to get out of bed.

Kahlo's accident happened in 1925, when she was 18 years old. During her life she had a great many operations on her spine, which involved bone transplants and wearing plaster or metal corsets to hold her disintegrating back in place. 'The Broken Column' was painted at such a time, during a five-month period where she was constricted by a steel corset. The date the work was made, 1944, was nearly 20 years after she suffered the initial accident.

In 'The Broken Column' Kahlo stares straight ahead, with teardrops falling from her eyes. Her damaged spine is replaced by a shattered architectural column, precariously keeping her body erect for the time being but not for long. Her torso is wrapped in tight straps for support, and a shawl or bedclothes have slipped down her body to reveal both her injured body and youthful skin and breasts. Her skin is pierced by nails, adding to her physical and emotional pain, and her anguish is made all the more palpable by the way in which her torso has been ripped open to show her damaged spine. The landscape behind reiterates the horror of surgical intervention with the deep ravines in the landscape echoing the cut going down Frida's body.

However for all the horror of this painting, Kahlo does not show herself as someone to be pitied but instead confronts her physical disabilities, forefronting them in her paintings with no flinching. Kahlo wants to be the brave sufferer of physical pain. She looks out at us directly, holds her body erect, her head up, and stares us in the eye, showing at once both strength and vulnerability. She was well aware of the effect her disabilities had on others and indeed used them to her own advantage at times; it has been said that she even opted to undergo surgery when it wasn't really necessary, knowing the power that her ailments had on her control of Rivera.

The painting style of this work does not make use of expressive, free brush strokes but instead shows a minutely-detailed realism. It is as if Kahlo wants to portray her suffering in a careful, realistic way, although at the same time, as is usual in her work, surrealist or fantastical elements creep in.

The Broken Column / The Little Deer

The Little Deer 1946

'The Little Deer' is a work where Kahlo makes imaginative use of her own bodily and emotional suffering, mixed with her playful and surrealist view on the world. It was painted at the same period in her life as was 'The Broken Column', when she had been bedridden and wearing a series of steel and plaster corsets. 'The Little Deer' was a gift to a friend, who also suffered back pain, and she painted it just before leaving for New York to undergo another spinal fusion operation.

Kahlo shows herself here with the body of a youthful deer, running from an unseen hunter. Her face shows its usual stoic expression but her deer body has been pierced by arrows that have created bloody wounds, referencing Christian martyrdom, particularly the story of St. Sebastian who would not renounce his faith despite arrows being fired at his body. The arrows can also be compared to those in Valentine hearts, pointing to Frida's pain in love as well as to her physical suffering. The youthfulness of the deer can be contrasted to the broken, ancient tree in the foreground, as well as to the broken branch from a young tree that lies at the deer's feet. The painting is a strange mixture of joy and pain; it celebrates youth and energy at the same time as exploring danger, pain and sadness.

For discussion

- What is the overall mood of each painting?
- How do the formal qualities of the painting add to the mood (for example the size of the painting, the colour, brushstrokes etc)?
- Discuss the different ways in which Kahlo shows her physical and emotional pain in these two paintings, then talk about how she also shows her strength and courage.
- How does Kahlo fit in with the background or landscape in which she shows herself? For example does the landscape relate to her in any way or does she seem separate from it?

Links to other works

Kahlo's still life paintings

You could compare the two paintings in this section to Kahlo's still life paintings, which can also be seen as a kind of self-portrait. The still lifes show ripe Mexican fruits that are often cut to show their fleshy interiors, in the same way Kahlo shows open wounds on her body.

Rebecca Horn

While Horn was bed-ridden for a number of months, she adapted her art practice to include using hand and body extensions that extended her range of touch and perception (see classroom activities section below). Compare Kahlo's practice to Horn's, thinking about the opportunities or restrictions involved in making art while confined to bed, and in making positive use of a disability to further explore art practice.

Classroom activities

Secondary

Using disability as a positive force in art practice

The activities for this section are aimed at secondary groups but may be adapted according to the teacher's discretion.

Disability was an aspect of Kahlo's identity that she incorporated into her arts practice. Her disability was as central to her sense of self as her complex relationship to Mexico and her sexuality. In comparison with her identity as a woman or a Mexican artist, it can be hard to find out information about how disability informs artists' practice. This is a research, discussion and reflective activity; where possible it may be worked on with collaboration from dance, drama and music colleagues.

Initially discuss with students any temporary disabilities they (or friends and families) have experienced, for example fractured arms/legs. If your student group includes students with disabilities it may be helpful to prepare with these students by discussion in advance so that they can decide how they wish to be involved in this activity and how you can best support them in their contribution to this work.

What adaptations did the students have to make in order to get on with daily life while they experienced a temporary (or more permanent) disability? (For example walking with crutches, arm in sling/plaster, using a wheelchair.) Discuss how these adaptations alter the experience of our bodies. For example it may make us feel more visible, less able to disappear into the crowd or strangers will ask us questions about 'what is wrong'. Rebecca Horn, a contemporary German artist, experienced three months in a hospital bed, which led her to develop a series of sculptures in the form of body extensions. These paradoxically both restricted and also widened possible movements of her hands, head and body.

Experiment in pairs or in small groups with cotton bandaging (torn sheets if limited budget!) to try different forms of wrapping, plaiting and knotting on each others arms/legs. See if some of these experiments can be videotaped or photographed as research. Then experiment with these techniques but not on the body, instead as free standing sculptural forms. How do these differ? Again, record these experiments. Elastic bandage or plaster-soaked bandage (trade name Modroc) are also excellent as contrasting materials in this activity.

Having made a range of samples, if possible work with colleagues in dance/drama/theatre to see how these can be used, either as body attachments or as objects/accessories that can accompany movement. Notice how these samples can extend and alter body shape, not only hindering but also exaggerating or pausing movement.

Further resources

You may want to research the London Disability Arts Forum, a fantastic resource on contemporary arts practice, which also provides information on the annual disability arts festival 'exposure' (usually held in Oct/Nov each year). LDAF website address is www.ldaf.org

Also for yourselves as teachers you may find the book 'Buried in the footnotes, the representation of disabled people in gallery and museum collections' published by the Dept of Museum studies, Leicester University, useful for a historical overview of disability in the gallery world.