

DISSOCIATIVE PHENOMENA IN THE PAINTINGS OF FRIDA KAHLO

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No other artist has reached so much popularity and recognition, not only domestically, but worldwide, as the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo. This contributed not only her art, but also her turbulent life story dominated by pain and suffering and the narcissistic staging of herself. Already a legend, she became a cult figure after her death.

Frida Kahlo was born on July 06, 1907, as the third of 4 daughters of a German Mexican couple, in Coyoacan, a suburb of Mexico City with spina bifida. While she was loved by the Father idolatry, she suffered from a lack of maternal affection. At the age of 6 she contracted polio, which left her right leg atrophied and brought her the nickname "Frida Hobbler". At eighteen she suffered a serious bus accident, which destroyed her already heavily biased spine by spina bifida, scoliosis and polio, fractured the right leg several times, shattered her pelvis and crushed her feet. Lying on her back in bed immobilized, she began to paint to occupy her time. She discovered a passion for painting, helping her deal with her fate. Soon she drew from her artistic talent, which later led to a successful career as a painter. The accident of devastating magnitude abruptly changed her life, leaving deep tracks: Many hospital stays, diagnoses and therapies followed with, sometimes unsuccessful operations, which made her symptoms worse. All her life she suffered unbearable, chronic pain, which she tried to fight with analgesics and narcotics, and later with excessive alcohol consumption.

But that's not enough: In her injured body also lived a wounded soul. If we believe the statements of the art historian Helga Prignitz-Poda, there was also evidence of another traumatic event, a possible sexual abuse that had taken place in her childhood. The evidence was based on an unpublished interview with the American curator Lesley Parker in 1939, where Frida Kahlo is said to describe herself as a "child living with a terrible secret" - relating to her father. The Author also interprets corresponding hints regarding child sexual abuse in Frida's poem "Memory", which she wrote as a 15 year old Girl.(1)

Frida also has suffered greatly, even among the injuries and emotional distress, which were supplied by notorious infidelity of her beloved husband and fellow painter Diego Rivera. In order to endure unbearable pain and much more, she painted obsessively, and found very quickly to her distinctive style which can not be defined by any art style. Some art historians, consider her a surrealist, which she denied it herself. However during her artistic career, she created a very own, private mythology, and became a legend.

Frida Kahlo, died after a life full of pain and suffering, losses and disappointments, at the age of 47 years, on 13 July 1954.

She left more than 150 paintings, many watercolors, drawings, a painted diary and a large collection of letters.

Life and work of Frida Kahlo are linked intimately. The essential feature of her artistic work is the visualization not only of external but also internal, psychological reality of a physically and psychologically traumatized woman, especially in her mostly small-sized self-portraits.. In her masterly staged, narcissistic self-portraits, which can be interpreted as a painted autobiography, she dealt with her difficult life situation, and her physical pain, so she acquired a reputation as a painter of the pain. Eloquent example of this, is her best known and most expressive painting *The Broken Column, 1944*. The picture shows the naked artist in an upright posture, in the middle of a deserted landscape. The gaze of the viewer is immediately on the corset and the multiple broken ancient column, in the wide open chest, extending from the chin to the pelvis. The face and the naked skin of the body are studded with numerous nails. She herself seems unconcerned, almost detached, with wandering eyes aimlessly into the wide, not suffering. The face expression acts as if she had no pain, completely distanced from the pain and body awareness. The flowing tears stand in strong contradiction with the unemotional, impassive face and look surreal. The pain is determined by the viewer, only through the symbols, such as corset, chest wound, broken pillar, nails on the skin and tears, as implying such. She herself seems to perceive her pain, without being affected, from the observer perspective, from a distance.

The situation is similar with the picture of *Injured Deer, 1946*. On display is one of nine arrows pierced deer body on which sits the head of Frida. The face that belongs to her own self, has no signs of pain. This creates the impression that she splited off the painful part of her identity and has turned into an animal form. She is not the wounded and suffering, but the deer.

The above pictures are fascinating testimony to the artistic realization of the theme of pain. Her iconography in relation to the expression and experience of pain, has a remarkable particular significance: Unlike the representations of pain in the well known Pictures from the Western art tradition, in which the features of pain in the facial expressions, gestures and posture are clearly reflected, we miss in the pictures of Kahlo the emotional component of pain experience. Neither postural nor in the facial features we can identify a person suffering from pain. One has the impression that the pain is separated from the personal identity of the artist, as not a part of her body, seen from outside, perceived from a distance.

This phenomenon of separation and emotional distance, which comes to light here, can be understood as an unconscious defense strategy, which aims at the elimination or reduction of excruciating pain. The Process known as "Dissociation" is an unconscious defense strategy, which aims at the elimination or reduction of excruciating pain.

Generally is meant by the Term Dissociation (separation), a change in perception of oneself and the outside world, caused by partial or complete loss of integration of functions of consciousness, memory and perception. Transient dissociative phenomena are normal and are among the

experiences that we know in our own experience, such as daydreaming. Dissociation is only pathological if it persists and uncontrollable dominates everyday life. In this case it is called Dissociative Disorders. They are usually a result of severe mental trauma as physical, such as early childhood sexual abuse and do not occur separately but are part of the complex symptoms of other diseases, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder(PTSD) and Borderline Personality Disorder. Dissociation is understood as a defense mechanism that serves to self of the individual. It helps to reduce the strong emotional pressure in an intolerable situation and creates relief.

The most common forms are dissociative amnesia, dissociative fugue, sensitivity and sensory disturbances, depersonalization, Derealisation and complex dissociative identity disorder as the strongest Form.

The Dissoziationsphenomena we also meet in other paintings by the artist, such as *The Two Fridas, 1939* and the *Tree of Hope, 1946*.

In the first picture there are two Fridas, sitting side by side, holding hands, one in a white dress in European-style, the other in a Mexican costum.

Their hearts are exposed and connected to each other with a blood circulation.

In the picture *Tree of Hope*, the artist sits in a red armchair, with a brace in his hand. In the other she holds a flag that has the word "tree of hope remain strong,". Behind her appears the second Frida, who lies on a stretcher. On her half-naked back, facing the viewer, we see two gaping and bleeding wounds, as an allusion to its recently completed operation. The double herself in both works, reflects a Self State which permits to conclude a dissociative splitting of identity.

On the basis of the above image analysis, the question is whether the evidencies of dissociation and separation tendencies, in the artistic representations, correlate to the real life of Frida Kahlo herself. A medical diagnosis as such, is not known in the long Anamnesis of Frida Kahlo, as at that time the term "dissociative disorder" did not exist in the psychiatric nosology. Therefore the answer for that question would be a little bit of speculating. However there are in fact, relevant evidences from her biography and from the statements of nearly all biographers and commentators of her works, which suggest Split Identity. Frida herself spoke of the "duality" of her personality. Her husband, Diego Rivera said: ".. the two Fridas, while the same person and two different people." (2) A similar statement was her classmate and friend Alejandro Gomez Arias: "The personality of this woman was so complex and contradictory, that we could say, there were many Frida. Maybe it was not those who wanted to be them." (3) Helga Prignitz-Poda characterized her as a woman with "emotional instability, chronic feelings of emptiness and fear of abandonment." (4) She also describes "withdrawal tendencies, emotional disruptions and well-hidden insecurity". (5) These precisely described characteristics of Frida by the author, can be attributed to the defining criteria of an "Emotionally unstable Personality Disorder" of Borderline Type. Very good in this picture, adjust her inconsistency and impulsivity, temper tantrums, impaired ability to bind with changing relationships,

while clinging to her husband and not least her fears, depressive episodes and suicide attempts.

Although the above mentioned clues don't allow a definitive diagnosis, but they point to a rather obvious possibility of a dissociation, which was suitable to give a visual expression to her splintered, fragmented inside, to manage her early traumatic experiences and to ward off her agonizing pain, that she had to suffer all her life. Otherwise, her art most likely would not be so extraordinary, if she had not this profound human experience.

Literature:

1-Helga Prignitz-Poda

Frida Kahlo, The Painter and Her Work
Schirmer / Mosel, 2007, p.14

2 - Diego Rivera

Frida Kahlo y el Arte Mexicano. Quoted in Hayden Herrera, Frida Kahlo, The paintings, Schirmer / Mosel, Munich, 1997, p.81

3 - Alejandro Gomez

Un Testimonio Sobre Frida Kahlo. Quoted in Hayden Herrera, Frida Kahlo, The paintings, Schirmer / Mosel, Munich, 1997, p.81

4 - Helga Prignitz-Poda

Frida Kahlo, The Painter and Her Work
Schirmer / Mosel, 2007, p.46

5 - ibid p. 29

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