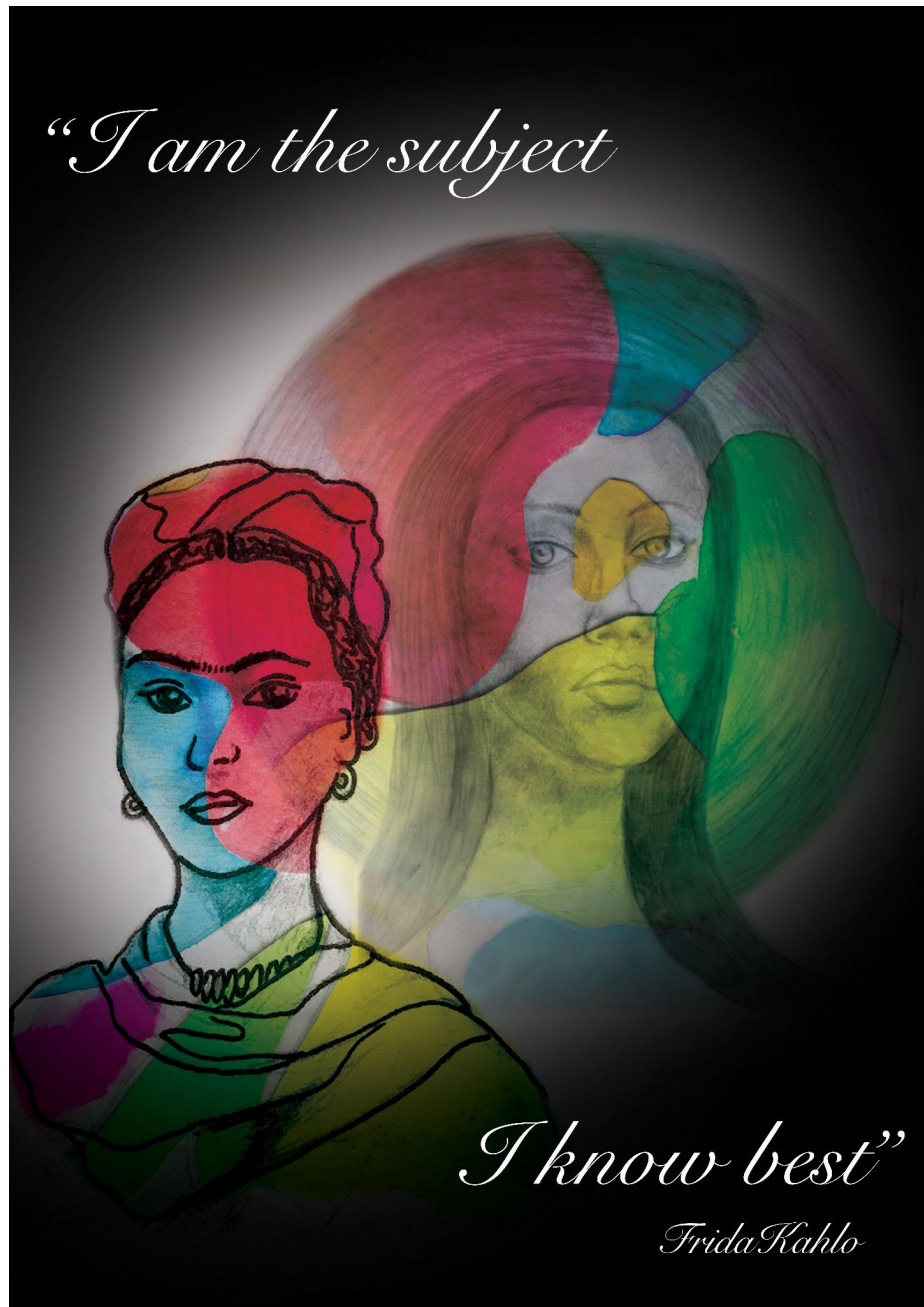




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Abstract

This is a response to the theme of 'self, identity and other' and how that is expressed and portrayed through the work of the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo. I have chosen to look at the idea of the persona, posing the question of whether the artist used it as a means of masking or revealing her own identity. Through Kahlo's creation of multiple identities (political, social and cultural) the challenge lies in being able to identify what version of the artist was mirroring back to herself. Was she hiding behind a projection of her own reality to create a safe space to express her own artistic voice, or was this a single true reflection that abides by the quote: "I am the subject I know best"? (Ray, 2020). Through observations of Kahlo's paintings between 1926 and 1954, particularly her self portraits, I look at how she depicted emotional turmoil in figures of herself and explore her inner world through psychoanalytic concepts. I focus primarily on the 'persona' and 'the mirror stage', as well as touching on themes such as 'the gaze' and 'subjectivity'. I aim to explore how the artist used her paintings as a way to communicate, and consider what Gillespie calls "the woman behind the icon" in relation to the subject's true identity.

2. Deconstructing the Human: Self, Identity and Other

Frida Kahlo: Was the persona masking her identity or acting as a true reflection of herself as an artist?

Introduction

This essay will explore how the self is expressed and portrayed through the work of Mexican painter, Frida Kahlo. I will be looking at the context and meaning behind the 'persona', relating to Jungian Psychology and Jung's structure of the mind; Lacan's concept of 'the mirror stage', and other concepts such as 'the gaze', 'subjectivity' and De Beauvoir's notion of 'the other'. This aims to explore the foundation of the paintings and how these concepts may unconsciously feed into Kahlo's work; identifying symbols, motifs and language; linking it to the ideologies of both Lacan and Freud.

I will investigate the work of Kahlo and collect viewpoints based on how the artist is perceived today, compared to the time period in which she painted and developed as an artist, between 1926 and 1954. This will help me to discover the impact she had on women using her female uncensored experiences, and how she shed light on issues relevant today without intention; depicting raw emotion and being honest about her hopes, fears and desires. This will also pose the question as to whether or not she showcased a true reflection of her own self through her work; whether she was honest in her approach to Art and if her attempt was to provide a voice for future female artists, or provide a voice for the voiceless by showcasing the unconventional. Were her self portraits a claim for attention, or were they a form of therapy and a means of showcasing her truth? This writing will view censorship, relating it to the political, social and cultural identities in terms of breaking conventional standards. It will also explore the influences in Kahlo's work, and if these identities could be adaptations of who she was, allowing her audience to question: "who was Frida Kahlo?" (Ray, 2020). This writing will also question whether or not Kahlo used the

persona as a means of creating a safe space to express her own artistic voice; did the artist also abide by the dominant social order at that time, described as a “double code”? (Lindauer, 1999, p.18).

Referring back to the set time period of 1926-1954, this essay will look into the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), its impact on Kahlo's political, cultural and social influences, and the reasons why the artist was considered an ‘iconic’ key figure for future feminists; addressing topics that had never before been represented, as an artist before her time.

1. The Mirror Stage

The Lacanian concept of ‘the mirror stage’ was the idea of a defining moment in an infant's life that came with the ability to recognise oneself in the mirror. It is the starting point for the development of the ‘self’ creating the division between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’. Viewpoints have differed in terms of how the self image, the “division between an inside and an outside” is accomplished in order to create a unified self (Gallop, 2018, p.79). This could link to Kahlo's need to express what was “inside and outside” of herself (FridaKahlo.org, 2002). Palmier believed that the mirror stage would piece the self together by implying that the image of the body in “totality” would replace the image in “anguish” (Gallop, 2018, p.79). However, there is a relationship between the past and the future of what is expected or anticipated compared to the reality that the subject is faced with: “the infant, having assumed by anticipation a totalised, mastered body, then retroactively perceives his inadequacy (his nakedness)” in relation to the human condition (Gallop, 2018, p.85). This suggests that ‘the turning point’ after the mirror stage achieves the opposite of a totalised image. Lacan and Freud also had differing opinions with the illusion of a constructed individual and what is mirrored back to them. Lacan believed this was “tragic”, “building upon a fiction”. Whereas Freud thought this “belief in a projected image” (Gallop, 2018, p.81) and the notion of an ideal self meant “there is hope” (Gallop, 2018, p.89-90). In support of Palmier's belief, the

version of the subject before entering 'the mirror stage' in Gallop's book is described as "the body in bits and pieces" which then organises itself into a "unified image" (Gallop, 2018, p.80). This indicates that the concept is about achieving wholeness and building upon a projected image over time.

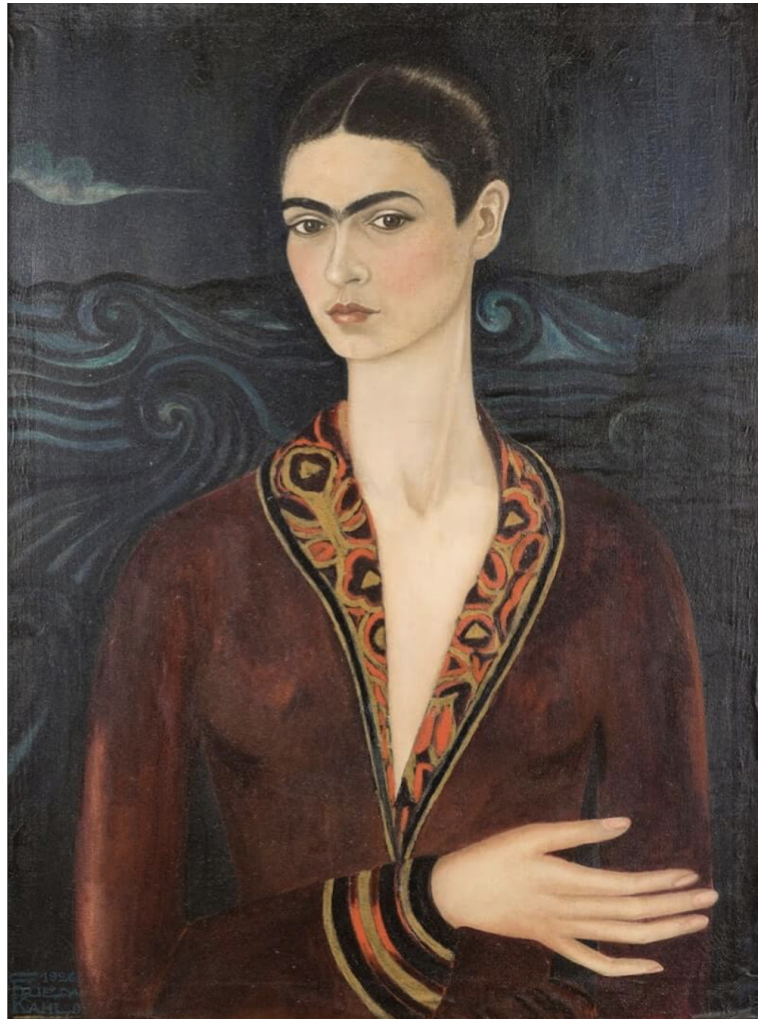


Fig. 1

Kahlo, F (1926) *Self Portrait in a Velvet Dress* [Oil on canvas] 23" x 31"

2. The Persona

At the beginning of the artist's career in 1926, Kahlo's painting *Self Portrait in a Velvet Dress* is the first time she constructs a persona with the statement "your Botticelli", referring to the Italian Renaissance painting *The birth of Venus* (Ray, 2020). This is the start of an

evolutionary process of the many personas that Kahlo would adopt, reflecting her influences from European art and culture.

The Persona is a Jungian concept and is described as “a performance of individuality, but it is not the individual itself” (Giles, 2020, p.16). It is a facade that we present to the rest of the world, influenced by societal and cultural normalities. Kahlo used themes such as death and nature in her work, deriving from Mexican folk painting. According to a paper on Jungian Theory, masks were popular in various cultures in creating the persona, such as in Ancient Greece and Japanese Noh Theatre. Similarly, Alfredo implied that in Mexico they would wear masks of death to celebrate life, as was often portrayed in Mexican culture: “we laugh with it, we eat it, we entertain ourselves with it” (Ray, 2020). These masks could be identified as “cultural archetypes, symbols that represent ancestral heritage” as an evolution of learnt behaviour and ideology. This relates to a concept in Jung’s model, known as the “collective unconscious” (Giles, 2020, p.22). According to the *Psyche* magazine article on ‘Kaloprosopia’: “The adoption of a mask might be both protective and illuminating, allowing someone a chance to flout convention and explore aspects of their character that would otherwise remain repressed”. As Herrera put it, “to come face to face with unexplored parts of ourselves” (Herrera, 1992, p.4). Contrary to this, “Jung argued that a persona could become pathological if an individual identified too closely with it” (Psyche, n.d.). The article concludes that the persona could reveal a lot about one’s self, as stated in ‘The Critic as Artist (1881)’: “Give him a mask, and he’ll tell you the truth” (Psyche, n.d.). This implies the controversial ideas behind the mask in terms of portraying one’s true identity.

A category within the Jungian model of Jung’s Persona Theory is related to an “inanimate object or concept” known as “attributed persona” or better known as “identity” (Giles, 2020, p.25). According to Hilda Trujilo, director of the Frida Kahlo Museum, Kahlo was an art collector influenced by the Mexican Revolution, and she used objects in her work to create

her 'artistic persona' which is described in the Jungian Theory paper as having "certain expectations, which impose constraints on performance but also allow for imaginative possibilities" (Giles, 2020, p.22). Nevertheless, it is said that "through the object you discover the artist, the person". In relation to building upon an idea of the self which is mentioned earlier in the essay on the topic of 'the mirror stage': "she rebuilt herself with the objects that surrounded her" (Troilo, 2019). This suggests that Kahlo used her art to enhance her performance.

In Sarah Erman's 2018 study of Josephine Schouteden Wery, similarly to Kahlo, she is described as "an individual with conflicting identities - as teacher, scholar, and wife". This indicates that the person "has to perform more than one social role in order to maintain a multifaceted self" (Giles, 2020, p.20). In correspondence, Kahlo's high school boyfriend, Alejandro Gomez Arias stated: "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 that she wanted to be" (Ray, 2020). Similarly, Art History Professor Gannit Ankori said: "in each of her portraits it's the same woman but it's not the same woman." She was therefore "constructing different identities" (Ray, 2020). This could suggest either a discovery of the self or perhaps the many 'Fridas' were used as a way to mask or disregard a single identity.



Fig. 2

Kahlo, F (1940) *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* [Oil on canvas] 15 ¾" x 11"

In Kahlo's 1940 painting *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair*, as a way of rejecting her ex husband Diego Rivera, she created a different version of herself, erasing everything that her husband loved about her appearance: "shows herself as a divided creature" (Ray, 2020). This could have been Kahlo's survival mechanism as well as a plea to show her "desperation and betrayal" (FridaKahlo.org, 2002). Kahlo used her mask as a powerful tool which went against the traditional idea of the persona being a "permanent structure" according to Jung; "the role expected by society" (Giles, 2020, p.20). This disagrees with the notion of building on a foundation as suggested on the topic of the mirror stage. This also

implies that the persona is something to abide by, following rules and structures to achieve an accomplished self, or to achieve the 'ideal self'. Similarly in Photographer Cindy Sherman's work, she plays with the idea of the persona which "undermines this attempt to fix her image according to our desires" exploring the boundaries of identity and rebelling against this fixed notion (Sherman, 1997, p.3).

3. A look at Frida Kahlo: The gaze, subjectivity and 'the other'

Lacan's structure of mind focuses on the symbolic and the linguistic, constructing meaning through language in order to develop a sense of self, similar to those in one's cultural environment. Kahlo used objects and motifs to represent the "feminine qualities of endurance, reality, cruelty, and suffering" as described in Rivera's autobiography, being "a subject of her own story" (Ray, 2020). According to the 2020 documentary directed by Ali Ray, Kahlo's paintings changed "drastically" between 1931 and 1932, moving on to what Andre Breton categorised as 'surrealism' (Ray, 2020). Although this was due to the artist's "dream-like expression" as well as the visual metaphors shown in her work, Kahlo did not see herself as a surrealist: "she put multiple versions of her reality on display" (Gillespie, 2019). She explained: "I paint my own reality. The only thing that I know is that I paint because I need to, and I paint whatever passes through my head without any other consideration" (Herrera, 1992, p.4). The artist believed that if she was painting her reality and not her dreams, this could not have been tied to surrealism. In relation to this art movement, Freud believed that "the unconscious could communicate through imagery and symbolism" (Study.com, n.d.). Therefore, it could be implied that Kahlo was influenced by the unconscious and what came to the surface, relating back to her childhood and the idea of being reborn. Kahlo had a real "need to communicate" (Ray, 2020). Herrera believed that the artist may have had 'Munchausen's syndrome' based on her desire to be focused on and desperate need to be loved.

Kahlo said: "Love is the basis for all life" which is evident from the projection of her pain of having lost a baby and her husband, Diego Rivera (Ray, 2020). According to Biographer and Art Historian Hayden Herrera, Kahlo used an "alternate Frida" which "confronted and confirmed her embattled reality" (Herrera, 1992, p.4). Even though she had the desire to be truly seen as an artist, it is also said that she hid behind a projection of her own reality through her suffering, having expressed "sensations, states of mind and profound reactions" in figures of herself (FridaKahlo.org, 2002). This projection was also described as a "mythic creature" (Herrera, 1992, p.4) or "androgynous creature" which reinforces the multitude of 'Fridas' in her work (Ray, 2020). This could be interpreted as a false self. The falsity is also emphasised in the mirror stage, being described as "an illusion done with mirrors" and "the product of an anticipatory illusion" (Gallop, 2018, pp.83-84). Nevertheless, it is explained how "Kahlo was honest about being a woman" in a 1900s patriarchal society, explained in an article about how Kahlo "broke all conventions" (Cheong, 2021). This suggests that there is controversy in regards to the artist and how she told her truth.

Ankori compares Kahlo's self portraits to the work of Rembrandt and Van Gogh, being able to portray the human condition. This also looks at how the artist "transcends time" in relation to what will become important in the future, to talk about painful experiences that were considered "taboo" and address the role of the woman in society, particularly in a cultural and social setting (Ray, 2020). Kahlo's rebellious spirit, known for pushing the boundaries in terms of her identity, gave her permission to use certain facial characteristics that were deemed as "inappropriately masculine" which included her monobrow and faint moustache (Ray, 2020). According to Ankori: "she knew she could adopt an alternative beauty" which would become her 'iconic' look for future generations (Ray, 2020).

Looking at the documentary directed by Giovanni Troilo, it is suggested that Kahlo was communicating with the future, or a future self by "leaving clues". It is also said that "she is playing with you, she is playing with the viewer" as though to say "this is the part of myself I

want people to see” (Troilo, 2019). In relation to this, the artist develops this “intense gaze” which emphasises her need to communicate (Ray, 2020). The gaze, according to Silverman meant “all subjects are subjected to it” (Mattoscio, 2017, p.63). With regards to the distinction between ‘the self’ and ‘the other’, it is suggested that Sherman is “the object of someone’s gaze” through the many characters that she embodies. This supports the idea of viewing others as objective (Sherman, 1997, p.3). Furthermore, the statement that Kahlo made: “I am the subject I know best” along with the artist’s personal content could imply that her work focused on the self, with the intention of creating unity and connection as opposed to separating the artist from the audience (Ray, 2020).

A statement by ‘Freeda En’, a collective human rights media brand, confirmed how people see the artist today and what they believe she wanted to communicate in her work: “Frida Kahlo taught us that our real strength is inside of us: she did it through her works, her life and her freedom” (Freeda En, 2020). Similarly, Alfredo explained in Ray’s documentary what he learnt about censorship, and how Kahlo taught him to paint without fear: “You make your own freedom, because when there is censorship you might as well not paint anything” (Ray, 2020). It may appear contradictory when Gillespie states: “Kahlo’s body of work reminds us that there are no simple truths” being referred to as “the woman behind the icon” (Gillespie, 2019). This is similar to the comments of Riverra and Gomez Arias, who were close to the artist during her time (Ray, 2020).



Fig. 3

Kahlo, F (1931) *Frida and Diego Rivera* [Oil on canvas] 39 1/8 " x 31 "

Kahlo's work here is an example of the classic distinction between the male and the female (husband and wife), reinforcing stereotypes and the depiction of the "binary definition of gendered social positions" (Lindauer, 1999, p.18). According to Herrera, these prescribed roles meant that Kahlo would be "restricting herself to the repressive social expectations of a devoted wife" (Lindauer, 1999, p.17). The 1931 painting of the married couple would suggest that the artist began to turn against her beliefs and ideologies about social inequality, being a strong female artist with the intention of challenging societal norms. According to Herrera's interpretation of the painter: "Kahlo's marriage profoundly affected her character, causing her to abandon professional aspirations" (Lindauer, 1999, p.17). In addition, Kettenmann

suggests that Kahlo “clearly did not yet have the courage to portray herself as an artist”. Nevertheless, feminist theorists Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar explored the ways in which female artists used a “double code”, being a safe method of self expression, split in two: “one that abides by the dominant social order and one that uses the same language but subverts social prescription” (Lindauer, 1999, p.18). Therefore, it is not to say that Kahlo did not include a true reflection of herself in the painting *Frida and Diego Rivera*. By not including ‘Rivera’ in her name, the painting shows a distinction and separation between the two: the “masculine” and the “feminine” (Lindauer, 1999, p.18). In the composition, Kahlo is tilted towards Rivera, but Rivera is tilted away from Kahlo with his palette firmly in his hand. This supports the idea that “while Rivera is designated by his active, social role outside of his relationship to Kahlo, she is distinguished only by her marital association” (Lindauer, 1999, p.19). This would indicate a woman’s identity being stripped to a role and an expectation - “the role of object, or other” (De Beauvoir, 1949, p.61-62) and that Rivera on his own represents “wholeness” (De Beauvoir, 1949, p.57). According to existentialist philosopher and social theorist, *Simone de Beauvoir* on gender inequality within written text: “psychoanalysts in particular define man as a human being and a woman as a female: every time she acts like a human being, she is said to be imitating the male” (De Beauvoir, 1949, p.61). The libido is even referred to as “energy based on the male” (De Beauvoir, 1949, p.60). In addition, Turbeville explained that this was the cause of “conditioned passivity and insecurity”, referring to female models who become “dehumanised” (Turbeville, 1980). De Beauvoir’s notion that “One is not born a woman, but becomes one” (De Beauvoir, 1949) also refers to the “anticipation” and “retroaction” of the mirror stage: “she appears to be what she will later become” (Gallop, 2018, p.78). This would suggest that the distinction between the two binary genders is a learned concept that supports the ideas presented in Kahlo’s oil painting. However, although Kahlo eventually gave up on the role as a wife when the couple divorced in 1939, she never gave up on the role of the ‘Mexican woman’ being referred to as a “central part of her identity” (Ray, 2020). In the context of “revolutionary transformation” it is

the first time the artist shows herself immersed in Mexican culture as a woman of Tehuantepec (Ray, 2020).

4. Political, Cultural History and the Mexican Revolution

Kahlo joined the Communist Party in 1928 after the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), alongside Muralist Diego Rivera, known for his far-left views. This was the birth of a new Mexico where they brought about “renewal and reform”, embracing both Mexican Art and pre-Hispanic culture. Kahlo “puts on the persona of the Tehuana, the Mexican woman” after moving to the US with her husband. Tehuantepec was known for its matriarchal society, for women’s “independence” and “beauty”. It was a pre-Hispanic era, post Mexican Revolution where “indigenous culture thrived”. This was a political statement that Kahlo made, announcing her ‘sartorial’ identity that made her stand out and become recognisable. She became “devoted to all things Mexican” in spite of rejecting “colonial culture”, having broken many societal norms and constructs (Ray, 2020). This was also a time after the Mexican Revolution and before Second Wave Feminism; what this meant for gender roles within the home and the attitudes towards women and the social order. Kahlo was ahead of her time as her work already established ideas that the movement brought about, such as queer identities, questioning traditional family roles, and the role of women in general.



Fig. 4

Kahlo, F (1939) *The Two Fridas* [Oil on canvas] 37 " x 37 "

The 1939 painting, *The Two Fridas*, addresses cultural identity and loss. It is what came after *Frida and Diego Rivera*, comparing the start and end of their relationship. The Frida on the left is described as "the European Frida" that Rivera rejected (Great Art Explained, 2020). Whereas, the Frida on the right is the "Mexican Frida" Rivera loved, dressed in the traditional Tehuana outfit. This double self portrait "made up of two conflicting identities" also creates wholeness with the artery connecting the broken heart on the left, and the heart being intact on the right. Both versions of Kahlo are "inextricably entwined, bonded with their hearts and hands in quiet resolve" (Bryson, 2023). In relation to the self and *the mirror stage*, the western Frida has taken the place of her husband, creating a "unified image" (Gallop, 2018, p.80). There is a sense of "totality" shown through the strength and power that the painting represents (Gallop, 2018, p.79). This would also symbolise the artist's past and

present, or the past and the “anticipated maturity” of the divided subject (Gallop, 2018, p.83).

In the years that followed, Kahlo became more independent with a list of rules she gave Rivera after they remarried in 1940, one of them being that she would pay her own way in her art: “determined, by Frida’s increased confidence in her creativity” (Ray, 2020). This reinforces the artist’s strength and transformation that would argue against the dark side of the persona, and it implies that she overcame living in the shadow of her husband.

Conclusion

Having focused my attention on two psychoanalytic concepts and the ideas on the background of constructing one’s identity, I have taken information about what we look at, referring to the gaze; the self and the other; and what is subjective and objective. There have been contradicting viewpoints based on the persona - recognising how much of our identity is concealed compared to how much of it we expose to others. It may be argued that ironically the use of a mask can bring one closer to their community, and their ancestral heritage, and therefore closer to themselves. It may also be suggested that due to the way in which the artist constructed many identities, she was communicating different sides of herself, and breaking conventional rules and structures. Therefore, finding herself through her work. This ‘cultural identity’ that stuck with Kahlo is related to making herself a work of art. As Photographer Lola Alvarez pointed out: “She is the only person who gave birth to herself” (Herrera, 1992, p.7). This is evidence showing the core of who Kahlo was as an artist. This also relates back to the Lacanian theory and Jung’s structure of the mind, looking at the collective unconscious, and the use of masks to symbolise one’s culture.

The artist’s need for love, attention, communication, and her use of exaggerated features could indicate that she over emphasised or ‘romanticised’ her life, referring to herself as ‘the subject’. On the contrary, by painting what she saw indicates that there is truth behind the artist’s persona. Kahlo was able to paint what she knew about her life, with everything that

gave her joy and sadness. Kahlo's paintings were a true reflection of the artist's pain, loss and suffering, with a particular emphasis on her relationship, devotion and betrayal. I have looked at how these experiences have shaped the Mexican painter.

We can discover how the artist wanted to be seen and heard using 'the gaze' as a powerful tool for communication; I have touched upon censorship and how it plays a vital role in expressing one's truth. The fact that Kahlo was a member of the Communist Party also suggests that she was strong in her political views, as well as being strong in who she was as a whole. In terms of what Kahlo was mirroring back to herself, we are able to recognise that through the artist we are forced to "come face to face with unexplored parts of ourselves" (Herrera, 1992, p.4). In addition, through showcasing a raw experience of womanhood, she gave strength to future generations (Freeda En, 2020).

I have looked at the opposing binary genders as an example of 'self' and 'other' and the difference between what is seen as passive, and what is seen as having power. With Kahlo being the main character - the subject - we are able to view her only as 'the self'. Her double self portrait *The Two Fridas* with the "conflicting identities" (Bryson, 2023) led to a creation of a totalised "unified image" (Gallop, 2018, p.80) which suggests Kahlo's increased confidence, growth and transformation throughout the time period she was an artist (1926-1954). Therefore, in answer to my proposed question: I can conclude that Kahlo's many identities were in fact a reflection of her true self as an artist.

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Fig. 2: Henri Matisse. (2009). *Self portrait with cropped hair - by Frida Kahlo*. Available at: <https://www.fridakahlo.org/self-portrait-with-cropped-hair.jsp> (Accessed 9 December 2023)

Fig. 3: FridaKahlo.org (2009). *Frida and Diego Rivera, 1931 by Frida Kahlo*. Available at: <https://www.fridakahlo.org/frida-and-diego-rivera.jsp> (Accessed 22 November 2023)

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