

Harry Clegg (2305785)

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Tutor's name: Holly Slingsby & Alex Duncan

Question 4: From the series of FINE ART MAKING research strand lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.

Introduction

Surrealism is an art movement that emerged in the 1920s in Paris as a reaction to the horrors and World War I and the political landscape in Europe at that time, when many were physically hurt and scarred from the war (Strom, 2023). Surrealism developed out of Freudian studies of the mind, and reflected the realms of conscious and unconsciousness allowing for dream and fantasy to combine with the rational and real (Nema, 2017).

Surrealist work often encompasses the bizarre, and can be symbolic of political commentary of self-expression. Surrealist artists used Freudian psychoanalysis to challenge reality by incorporating dreams, using them to symbolise the subconscious mind. In doing so, it exposes the inner meanings of human nature and spirit by uniting dreams with reality, expressing innermost thoughts with distortion and exaggeration. As a form of true expression, Surrealism can be spiritually healing for the artist as well as being visually interesting for the viewer. Fu (2022) states that “The paintings are not only visually powerful but also intrinsically meaningful, so that the author's innermost thoughts and the social focus can coexist” (Fu, 2022, p. 15).

André Breton (1896-1966) was a major theorist of the surrealist movement and is considered as the father of surrealism. He claimed that “the parameters of classical art were too rigid and formal to speak for the modern world” (Gurney, 2020). His thinking has influenced many artists including Pablo Picasso, Alberto Giacometti, André Derain, and Jean Cocteau and Rene Magritte (Cowling, 1985). Magritte is known for works such as *The Son of Man* (1964), which shows floating apple hiding a man's face, *The Lovers* (1928) showing two people kissing with their heads covered, and *Golconda* (1953) showing people falling from the sky. He also did *Empty Mask* which is on permanent display at the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff [fig.1]. It is a fascinating example of a Surrealist painting, which six distinct images joined in an irregular frame like a stained glass window, where each image contains another image. It is seen as a reflection of the subconscious and a rejection of the tendency to see connections between things that are near each other, and instead to question what we see (Gurney, 2020).

This essay will focus on two well-known artists who are not immediately associated with Surrealism. Alberto Giacometti and Frida Kahlo have both been known as Surrealist artists but Giacometti moved away from the Surrealist movement, and Kahlo did not identify herself as being part of the movement.



Figure 1: Empty Mask by Rene Magritte (1928) own photo

Alberto Giacometti

Alberto Giacometti was a Swiss artist born in 1901 but lived and worked primarily in Paris from the 1920s until his death in 1966. Giacometti was described by John Berger (2021) as having the face of a man with wisdom with his temperate, endurance and cunning visible on his face. This expressiveness can translate into his work. Berger also described Giacometti's work as unforgettable, honest and expressing a truth.

Giacometti is mainly known as a sculptor of human figures, distinctive for their stretched appearance. His links to surrealism give a unique view of the human form. This can be seen in his bronze *Standing Woman* (1948-50), which is tall and thin, with an armoured head. Giacometti describes it as "attempt to find a solution to the conflict

between calm, full things and sharp, violent things” (Dantini, 2008, p. 103). As well as being one of the most influential sculptors of the 20th century, he was also a printmaker, painter and draftsman.

Giacometti was influenced by Surrealism and had a particular interest in exploring the subconscious, dreams, psychological states and themes of violence and sexuality as can be seen in one of his most famous works; *Woman with her Throat Cut* (1932). The sculpture which shows a brutal disembowelled form, uses the Surrealist techniques of “shocking juxtaposition and the distortion and displacement of anatomical parts to express the fears and urges of the subconscious” (Flint, 2023). His work touches on philosophical concepts such as existentialism and phenomenology and the human condition as a way of exploring individual freedom, responsibility, and search for meaning in an indifferent universe (Earle, 1960).

Suspended Ball / La Boule suspendue (1931) is a key example of Giacometti’s involvement in the surrealist movement [fig.2]. The original version was made in 1930 and attracted the attention of André Breton and Salvador Dalí because it was "ambiguously erotic, susceptible to infinite interpretations, but finally without any unequivocal meaning, it is a perfect example of an object with a symbolic function" (Dantini, 2008, p. 103). It was irregular and rough, but was later destroyed. However, there are a few different versions of it. There was also preparations for a wooden version which can be seen in photographs, but the sculpture was also destroyed. The 1931 version consists of a metal cage with a ball suspended from the top, and a crescent shape underneath (Giacometti Foundation, 2025). The ball is not a true sphere as there are carved indentations around three quarters of its circumference, making it appear fragile (Roach, 2016).



Figure 2: *Suspended Ball / La Boule suspendue* by Alberto Giacometti (1931)

In 1947, he unveiled a similar sculpture, still with a metal cage but the ball and crescent were made from plaster. It has Giacometti's signature, and the words 'original plaster' are inscribed with a brush. The only version of the sculpture that still exists is the copy he made in 1965, which is said to be almost identical to the version from 1947 but smaller (Giacometti Foundation, 2025).

The *Suspended Ball* portrayed in art all the things Breton and the Surrealists wanted to show through literature and poetry. Sculpture was the perfect artform as it allowed a visualisation of the unconscious to be expressed in three dimensions. The work follows surrealist visual goals of being anti-formal, by being potentially interactive, temporal, and having real movement instead of a representation of movement. These aspects challenge previous notions of sculpture as unmoving, and not to be touched.

Another reason the work was praised as a surrealist piece was because of the erotic overtones. Salvador Dalí described it as having a feminine groove, and the pendulum movement as well as how the piece fit together, evoked sexual engagement. However, Hal Foster viewed the work as sexually ambiguous, an impression rather than being explicit, as it is not easy to determine which parts of the sculpture should represent the male and the female. In both interpretations there seems to be an abstract impression of human relationships (Roach, 2016).

Although Giacometti was successful with the Surrealist group, he moved away from surrealism to work based in reality rather than fantasy, but some of the psychological themes in his surrealist work continued into his other art (Palumbo, 2020). An example of this is *Diego*, [fig. 3]. Giacometti does fascinating lines, sometimes using harsh black lines. He also creates interesting shadow effects that add depth to his work. In this piece, it looks like the entire face is made up of lines, giving it a distorted, surrealist look. The painting looks simple at first glance, but then upon looking closer, it is very complex. The deliberate looking scribbles make up clear parts of the painting and create a face full of expression. The shape of the silhouette is interesting as the head seems to be thin in comparison to the shoulders, making it look like the body is larger or closer than the head. It almost looks like it is walking towards the viewer. The dark colours and the distorted face with dark and light lines give it an eerie feel. The dark figure in the dark background is illuminated by a patch of lighter colour around him, but he himself is not illuminated. He could be walking into a shadow. Although this is not one of his Surrealist works, it has elements of a Surrealist, dream-like aesthetic.

A lot of his work had the theme of awareness of death. He was not morbidly concerned with death but was focused on life “as a man whose own mortality supplied the only perspective in which he could trust” (Berger, 2021, p. 327). He often looked to the deceased for inspiration. He sat by two separate people who had just died. These experiences informed his artistic research and influenced a lot of his sculptures, painting and ink drawings (Witek, 2021).



Figure 3: Diego by Alberto Giacometti, (1959)

The darkness of his character and eeriness in his work can also be seen in his 'Portrait of Caroline' [Fig. 4]. What is striking about this work are the colours and the design of the figure. The way the lines and colours appear on her body look almost like she is bleeding through bandages. Caroline was a prostitute and the subject for a series of the later portraits by Giacometti. The Caroline portraits all contain a haunting intenseness and a charged stillness. These impressionist works have a surrealness to them but they were not done during his surrealist period.

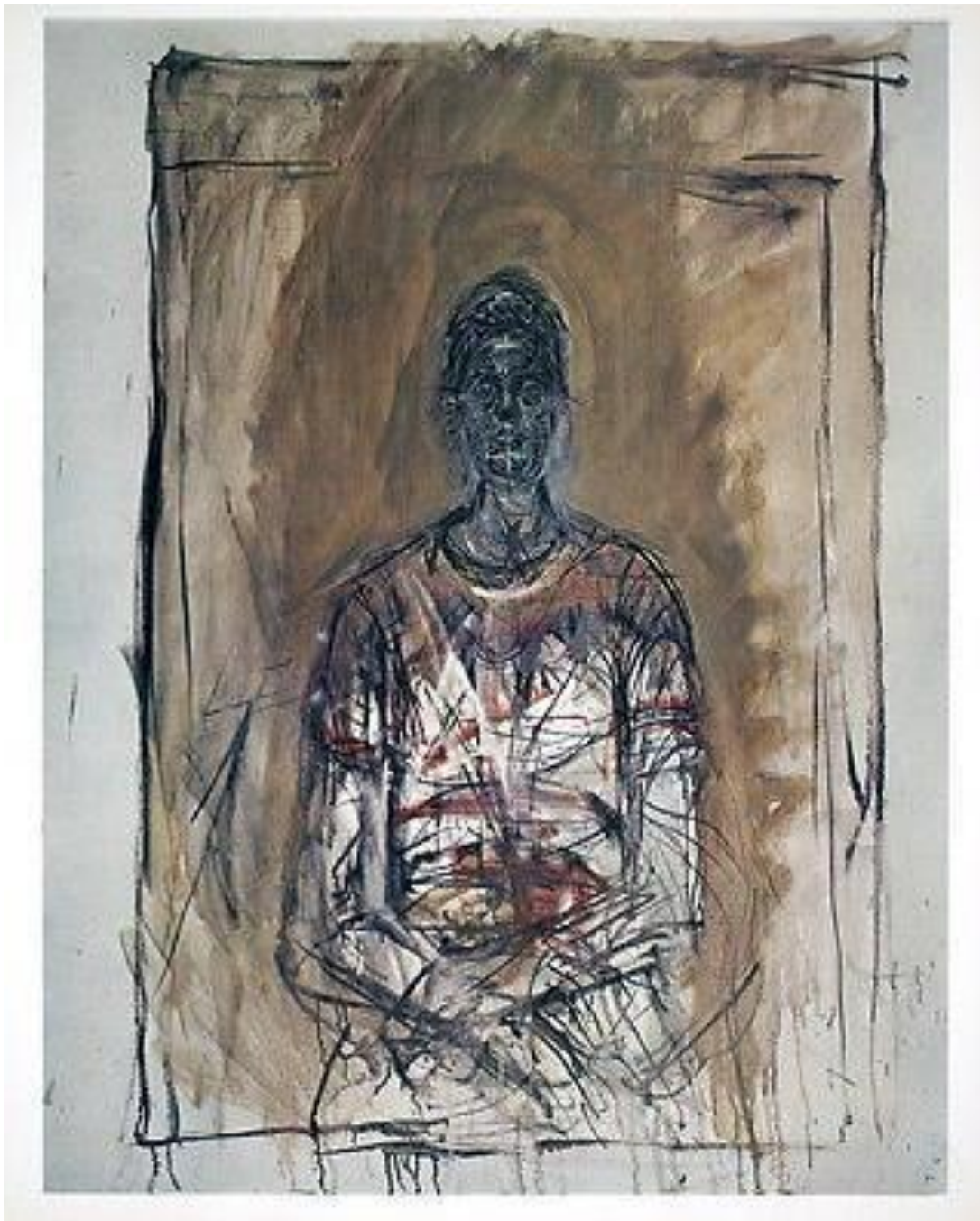


Figure 4: Portrait of Caroline by Alberto Giacometti (1972)

Frida Kahlo

Frida Kahlo was born in Mexico, in 1907. At age six, she contracted polio leading to one leg being thinner than the other. Then at 15, she was in an accident that crushed her ribs, foot and pelvis, and broke several other bones leading to over thirty operations. She turned to art a way of expressing her pain and trauma (Hooks, 2003). Kahlo often puts herself in her paintings, making them autobiographical in nature. Details from her own life are used to symbolise the physical and psychological pain she experienced (Lindauer, 1999).

Art historians have placed her work in different categories including Mexican popular art, feminist art, communist art and surrealism (Berger, 2021). Strom (2023) notes that the problem with surrealism is that it has been historically dominated by white men due to their experience in the War (Lindauer, 1999). Frida Kahlo pushes against this stereotype as a Mexican woman. As a woman, Kahlo was also depicted women differently to the male Surrealists. Male surrealists often depicted women in roles such as nymphets, dolls, or fetishised them as goddesses or devils. Female Surrealist artists questioned the image of women and society's established gender roles by emphasising their unique persona. Like male Surrealists, Kahlo engaged with imagination and the unconscious as a way to express her own pain and political views on Mexico (Pfeiffer, 2020).

André Breton himself described Kahlo's work as 'pure surreality' during his visit to Mexico in 1938. Kahlo painted in surrealist styles despite not being part of the surrealist movement (Lindauer, 1999). Her work is often dreamlike and contains irrational elements to them. These are used within surrealism as tools for reconfiguring consciousness. Some of the other surreal qualities in her work include the juxtaposition of violence and eroticism, floating objects and hybrid figures such as the self-portraits of her as a deer or other creatures. Even though a lot of her work is autobiographical rather than fantasy, there are fantastical elements to her pieces. A counter argument to this is that while her work contains fantasy, she does not fully let go of reality in her work (Kettenmann, 2000, p.48). When talking about surrealism, Kahlo herself stated that she "never had the intention of creating a work of art that could fit that classification" (Kahlo cited in Lindauer, 1999 p.86). However, her work is stylistically similar to

surrealist artist and her metaphoric self-expression falls in line with the Surrealist movement. Her fantasy images in her work are seen as a way of “coming to terms with reality, not of passing beyond reality into another realm” (Herrera cited in Vellucci, 2016 p.116). This is another aspect that fits in with the surrealist movement.

When directing a film about Kahlo’s life in the film *Frida* (2002), Taymor chooses to blend realism with surrealism, fantastical imagery and magical effects (Vellucci, 2016). These stylistic choices were to match the Frida Kahlo aesthetic. Kahlo also said that “I really don’t know whether my paintings are ‘Surrealist’ or not, but I do know that they are the most honest expression of myself, taking no account of the opinions and prejudice of other” (cited in Nema, 2017 p. 209). This description of her work further places her within Breton’s definition of Surrealism, as he stated that Surrealism comes from creating work from what Freud call the unconscious; the self and innermost thoughts, and bringing insecurities to the surface.



Figure 5: Roots (Raices) by Frida Kahlo (1943)

Roots (1943) is a good example of Surrealism [fig. 5]. She depicts herself as bleeding plant, symbolising her surgical trauma as well as connecting to the weeping woman in Mexican folklore and possibly referencing the Mexican blood flower. Another of her works that shows physical pain is *The Broken Column* (1944). It shows her in a steel corset holding her and nails pierce her skin, symbolising the pain of her surgeries (Torres, 2025). She

often used symbolism of painting body parts to express her feelings in a way that has been described as 'surrealist curiosities' (Berger, 2021).

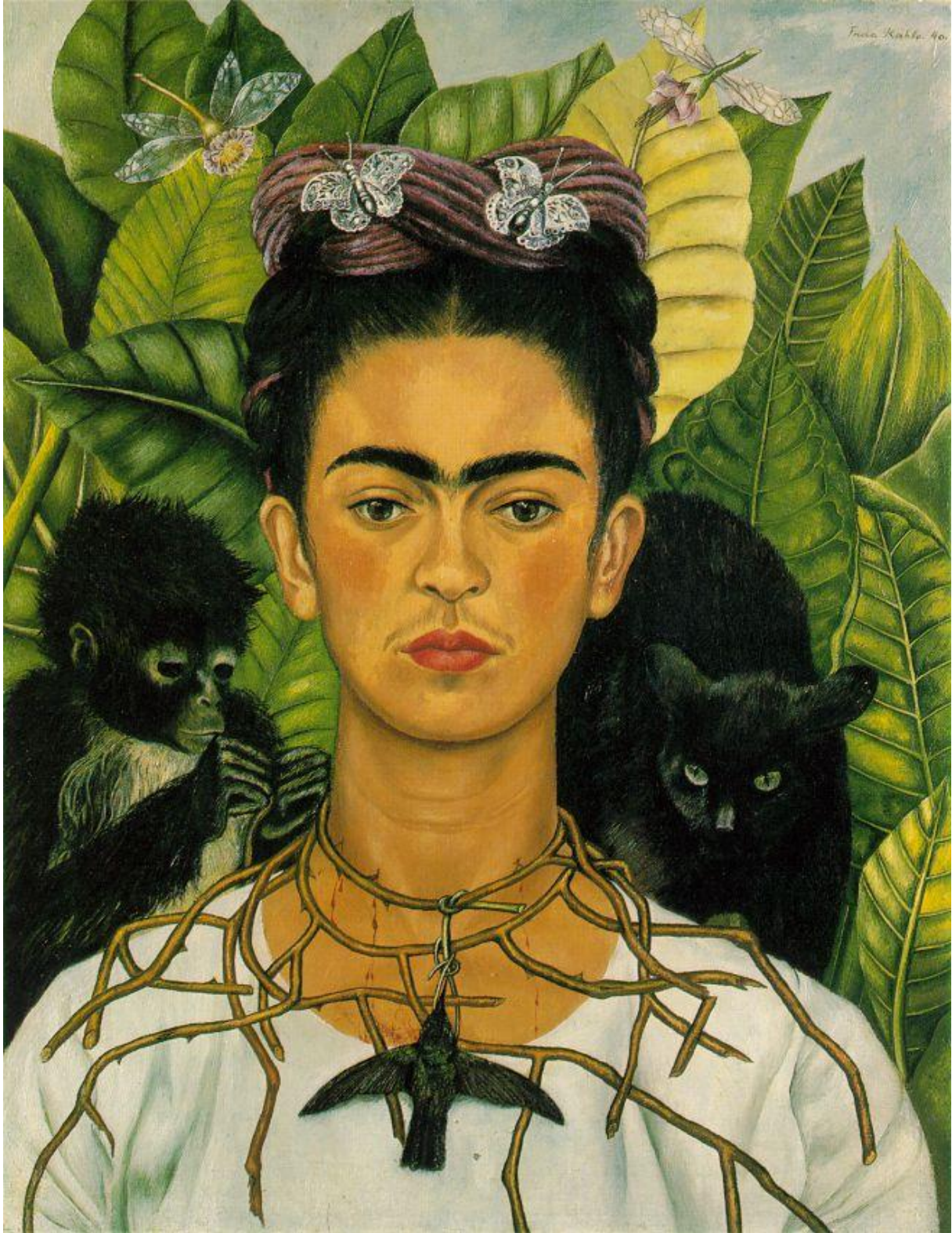


Figure 6: Self Portrait with Necklace of Thorns by Frida Kahlo (1940)

Kahlo's 'Self Portrait with Necklace of Thorns' (1940) is an interesting, autobiographical piece with a lot of symbolism [fig.6]. There are a lot of contrasting colours with the plants and black animals, making her stand out from the background. The painting shows her connection to nature with the green leaves taking up almost all of the background as well as being surrounded by animals. The animals each represent a different message. The black cat is a symbol of bad luck. This could express the bad luck Kahlo had with her health. The monkey signifies her marriage to Diego Rivera as they had a pet monkey. The mischief nature of the monkey could be said to represent the hurt caused by Rivera during their marriage (Kettenmann, 2000). It could also represent the children she could not have (Ohayon, 2024). The hummingbird in Mexican culture is a symbol of love, but the dead hummingbird in this painting could signify Kahlo's lost love or lost hope for love (Ohayon, 2024). The butterflies in the painting symbolise transformation. This could be referring to her transformation into an artist, which is a path she took after her accident as she was unable to finish medical school (Kettenmann, 2000).

One of the more prominent feature of the painting is the thorns around her neck. It is described as being a symbol of the intense physical pain she experienced and her emotional suffering (Chen & Liu, 2020). It also has Christian connotations linked to the crown of thorns worn by Jesus on the crucifix. It could be argued that Kahlo is comparing herself to a martyr by showing the torment she has endured (Chen & Liu, 2020). This is juxtaposed with symbols of hope and transformation like the butterflies and dragonflies. This juxtaposition is something found in a lot of Surrealist works.

Conclusion

Both the artists chosen have done some work within the surrealist movement but neither are fully surrealist artists. Both have been put into other categories but surrealism come through in a lot of their works.

When discussed in relation to Surrealism, Frida Kahlo and Alberto Giacometti represent different approaches within movement. Kahlo's work explores personal suffering and psychological states through vivid, Mexican style symbolic self-portraits. She used animals, blood, indigenous motifs, and bodily imagery to express identity and pain. While Frida Kahlo diverges from the European surrealist movement with distinct cultural and political views, the nature of her work still put her in a surrealist category. As with other female surrealist artists, Kahlo was not restricted to the surrealist scope that was started by European men, but her work can still be described as surrealist in nature.

In contrast, Giacometti was concerned with perception and the human condition. His sculptures often reflected existential anxiety and the impossibility of fully grasping reality. He used cage-like structures and dream objects. Kahlo's art is intensely personal and cultural, while Giacometti's is philosophical and existential.

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