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Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between surrealism and trauma by analysing the work of Frida Kahlo, Leonora Carrington, and Paul Nash. Three artists who, by the identification of others, are classed as surrealists, despite not choosing this label for themselves, but due to the viewer interpreting their work to be of a surreal nature.

While other surrealist works typically explored the dream state, these three artists created imagery based on their experiences of war, disability, abandonment, and mental institutions. Experiencing trauma such as this can cause memory to become distorted. Is this the root of the surreal nature of their work, and how can art practice be used as a tool to process traumatic experiences?

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I declare that all the material in this dissertation is my own work.

Introduction:

Why is Art Important?

In his book *Art as Therapy* (2013, p.4), Alain de Botton claims, “The modern world thinks of art as very important”. However, while this may be true to some extent, if one were to ask the current conservative government, they would likely argue otherwise. ~This can be seen in various attacks against the creative sector and arts education in recent years, thus leading to a growing divide between those who value the arts and those who view it as a waste of time, money, and energy, all while constantly consuming it regardless (Lee. 2022).



Figure 2: Jabbaren cave Wall painting Herd of Cattle - 3000 - 2500 B.C.

On the contrary, art is perhaps more important than ever. It is a vessel for communication, sharing our lived experiences, reflecting on the current moment, and processing our pasts. Without art throughout history, we would not have proof of their experiences or how we got to where we are today. Take the earliest cave paintings made over thirty thousand years ago or the Bayeux tapestry, to name a few examples; they express a narrative we can still refer back to and understand today. The cavemen may not have had a written language, but their cave paintings still show how they lived, hunted, and had their own sense of community (Figure 1). Furthermore, the Bayeux tapestry (Figure 2) documents the events that led up to the Norman conquest of England and the coronation of William the Conqueror in 1066, arguably one of the most notable events in British history. Without this piece of art, we likely would have no idea how these key events unravelled.



Figure 1: Bayeux Tapestry; scene 51,e: Anglo-Saxon Shield-Wall and Norman Cavalry. c.1070-80

Art transcends time and language; it is a way to leave a mark in the world that will outlive the self, and future generations will still understand our current events while language will have evolved beyond what we can imagine. In the past century, art has been used as protest or activism to give the general public, as well as marginalised communities, a voice in growing populations or to have an expression of self where otherwise they would not have been accepted so welcomingly.

Why surrealism?

Surrealism has been identified as a topic relevant to this thesis, as before writing the first surrealist manifesto in 1924 and before the First World War, Andre Breton studied medicine with an interest in mental illness. However, he was conscripted during World War One, during which he worked in a hospital in Nantes on the Neurological ward (Poetry Foundation. 2023). This prior interest in the subject area lends itself to the basis of surrealism.

The term “surrealism” itself even means “beyond – reality” (Tate.org, n.d.), whether this is to portray life in such a way that it becomes separate from reality or to encounter memory through a lens of the subconscious mind, such as through dreams.

This thesis will explore Surrealist art in the context of mental health and trauma, another topic of importance in today’s society. Exploring the work of three twentieth-century artists: Frida Kahlo, Leonora Carrington, and Paul Nash. Each of these artists used their work to express personal or collective trauma and its effect on mental well-being through surrealist imagery in a time when mental health was not so greatly understood as it is today.

The artists explored in this thesis never identified as surrealists themselves, although, upon encounters with Breton or other members of the surrealist group (and, on occasion, the wider art world), they have been identified as “surrealist” through their portrayal of a less than ideal reality. This is not uncommon, as supported by Tate:

However wide the influence of surrealist concerns has been on artists across the world, certain artists who have been assimilated to the movement have always refused to be defined as Surrealists.

(Tate.org, n.d.).

Through understanding these artists and their work, we can see the importance of how art and mental health intersect today, as it is often essential to look at the past to understand the present, exploring the question: How can art practice be used as a tool to process traumatic experiences?

Main body:Frida Kahlo:

Frida Kahlo, born in Mexico in 1907, started painting at eighteen years old in 1925 while recovering from a disastrous bus accident that left her disabled and in pain for the remainder of her life. Through her work, she began expressing the emotional and physical pain that came from this accident, as well as her unstable relationship with fellow painter Diego Rivera. Andre Breton, the founder of surrealism, described her work as “self-made surrealism” (MOMA, 2023). However, Kahlo refused to be identified as a Surrealist herself and claimed never to have painted dreams as the surrealist group did, only her reality (Chadwick. 2021. p.78).

Breton was impressed that Kahlo’s work had blossomed ‘into pure surreality,’ although she had no contact with the surrealist group in France and had no prior knowledge of their concerns.

(Fer. et al. 1993. p.241).

Despite denying being a surrealist, encountering surrealism in the 1930s enhanced Kahlo’s reliance on symbolic imagery to represent the psychological (Chadwick. p.114). This can be seen in her 1932 painting, *Henry Ford Hospital* (Figure 3).



Figure 3: *Henry Ford Hospital* by Frida Kahlo, 1932. oil on metal.

The painting depicts the artist crying and bleeding onto a hospital bed, with inscriptions on the bed that reads “Julio de 1932 F.K.” and “Henry Ford Hospital Detroit”, indicators of the time and place of the event (July 1932 at The Henry Ford Hospital), in a scene seemingly set out in the open as indicated by the industrial landscape in the background and the bed appearing to float in the foreground. Kahlo is seen holding her stomach, and from her hand are six red ribbons, reminiscent of veins, attached to objects representing her emotions in the moment or thoughts that

may have been weighing on her as a result of the miscarriage. These objects include a cross-section of a female reproductive system, a male foetus, a snail, a mechanical part (possibly a machine), a wilted purple orchid, and a pelvis.

The painting reflects on the experience of her third miscarriage due to the injury to her pelvis and reproductive organs from the bus accident seven years earlier, as indicated by the pelvis and anatomical model shown. Kahlo is aware this is the cause of her miscarriages and reflects on how this has affected her later life. The anatomical model and the wilted orchid also communicate a fear of being infertile, as well as the orchid being a gift to her from Rivera, perhaps symbolising that she feels she has let him down. Kahlo later believed that painting completed her life and accepted that she did not need to have children to feel so, despite this being the expectation at the time (Chadwick. 2021. p.171).

The scene of the painting, the floating bed set in front of an industrial backdrop, alludes to feelings of disorientation or a distorted reality, feelings that often come from experiencing a traumatic event such as Kahlo has depicted. This may be recognised as “Derealisation” or “Depersonalisation”, something Kahlo is indicated to have experienced throughout her life; according to Grimberg in *Mirror Images: women, surrealism, and Self-representation* (1998, p.83), Kahlo “lived surrounded by mirrors (...) each time she felt uneasy over losing her grasp of her sense of self (...) all she had to do was look into a mirror” (Figure 4). This kind of difficulty in processing reality is often attributed to a struggle with mental health, typically after experiencing trauma (National Health Service, 2023), which is a critical factor in Kahlo’s subject matter.



Figure 4: Frida Kahlo, photograph, by Lola Alvarez Bravo. c.1944.

Due to this struggle with her sense of self, her art practice was vital to her development of “self-objects,” things that represented her, her life, and her relationships. Whether they were symbolic of genuine relationships or ones that she

wished she had and never came to be (Grimberg. 1998. p.89). According to Chadwick in *Women Artists and The Surrealist Movement* (2021. p. 209): “Kahlo's obsession with her own physical reality dominates her self-identification with nature.” This can be recognised in the symbol of the wilted orchid in *Henry Ford Hospital* (figure 3), something that typically would be able to reproduce a new flower now cannot as it is wilted and dying, as Kahlo may have also been in that moment.

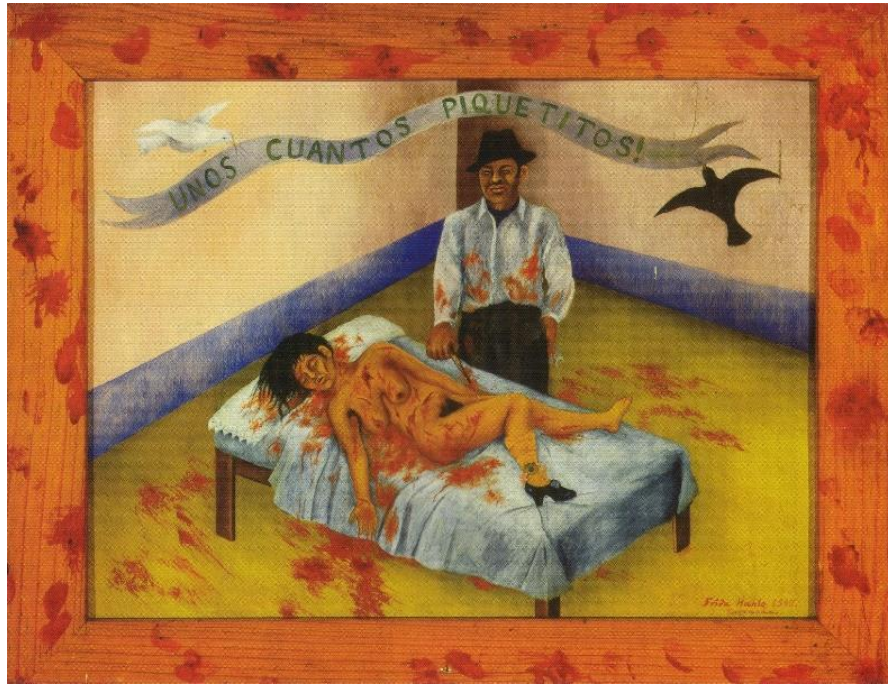


Figure 5: A few small nips by Frida Kahlo, 1935, oil on metal.

Painted three years after *Henry Ford Hospital*, upon discovering Rivera's affair with her younger sister. *A Few Small Nips*, 1935 (Figure 5), shows a scene set with plain walls and a green floor. The bareness of the room gives a sense of something looming or un-spoken. Within the scene, a deceased woman is seen lying on a bed, nude, except for one sock and shoe. However, the woman is not Kahlo, an unusual choice for her not to depict herself when appearing in almost every other painting. The woman's lack of clothing indicates a lack of identity, nothing to indicate who she is. Perhaps an indicator of feeling like she had only been used for her body and then discarded when she came to no longer be useful to the man standing beside her, who is well-dressed and seen holding a knife, also bearing a resemblance to Kahlo's husband, Diego Rivera.

Two birds fly above them, one black and one white, holding up a banner that reads “unos cuantos piquetitos!” in reference to the title of the painting. The white bird may be interpreted as a dove, often representing freedom or peace. This contrasts the black bird, which may be a crow, a symbol of death and misfortune, or a raven, often seen as a symbol of intelligence and transformation (source); however, given the violent nature of the image, the representation of a crow would be most fitting.

Blood covers the scene: the woman, the bed, the floor, the man and even the frame of the work itself. The red paint on the frame leads to the idea that the blood is leaving the boundaries of the painting, alluding to the scale of the reality that led to

Kahlo's creation of the painting. The betrayal from these two people she cared about was so intense that she had worked on the painting for fourteen years, constantly leaving and returning to it, and stabbed it twenty times.

The length of time spent on it alone indicates how greatly the situation troubled Kahlo (Grimberg. 1998. p.92). Despite this, Kahlo portrayed the situation as if it was happening to someone else, as identified earlier, an interesting and rare choice not to represent herself. This may have been a way of Kahlo attempting to distance herself from it (Grimberg. 1998. p.92-93) or depicting the harshness of the situation as if it were happening to someone else to alleviate the pain from herself.

The circumstances under which the painting came to be, it would also be fair to state that the unusual step of not featuring in the image personally could have been that she was expressing a formidable amount of anger towards her sister for the adultery. However, by not identifying her woman in the painting clearly, she may also be hiding feelings of guilt for potentially portraying her sister as someone so brutally murdered. Alternatively, the deceased woman in the picture may represent the death of her sister as someone she believed she knew and trusted so well. A portrayal of the grief and anger felt towards the relationships between herself, and the people shown in the painting.

Through dissecting these two paintings, it is clear that Kahlo made her life, relationships, and well-being the source of her work, as encouraged by Rivera (Grimberg. 1998. p.91). However, while living in Mexico, fellow artist Leonora Carrington became a good friend of Kahlo and recognised that this way of working and self-absorption, while giving her work immense symbolic power, may have also had a role in keeping Kahlo stuck in her suffering and unable to move on from issues that were troubling her (Grimberg. 1998. p.102).

Leonora Carrington:

Leonora Carrington, identified previously as a friend of Kahlo, was an English painter born in Lancashire in 1917, the only girl of four children. As a result of this and her newly wealthy parents, the expectations put on Carrington early on were for her to marry an aristocrat. Thus she was educated until the age of ten by a governess in her family home, a gothic mansion known as Crookhey Hall, then sent to finishing school in Florence, Italy, at fifteen with the expectation of coming out as a debutant. In contrast, her brothers were sent to boarding school. This left Carrington with a sense of isolation at an early age, and her imagination was heavily influenced by her home's architecture and tales of Celtic mythology from her mother (Hessel and Moorhead. 2019).

In 1937, at the age of twenty, Carrington met Max Ernst, another surrealist artist twenty years older than herself, at a dinner party and soon after began a relationship with him (Lewis. 2015). Angering her father to the point that he tried to have Ernst arrested and sent back to Germany. Carrington and Ernst knew they had to disappear, so they fled to Cornwall for a brief period, where Carrington met other surrealists and finally felt understood by the people she had met, thus opening her eyes to a new way of life (Hessel and Moorhead. 2019).

Soon after the outbreak of World War Two, while the couple were living in the south of France, Ernst was imprisoned twice by the French government for being German, deemed then as an “enemy alien.” The second time around, Carrington did not cope so well, and a friend of hers who was driving through France at the time to get to Spain convinced her to go too (Lewis. 2015). She decided to leave France, and at this moment, she did not know if she would ever be reunited with Ernst.

Carrington soon reached Madrid with her friend in 1940; however, shortly after arriving, she suffered a breakdown, resulting in her being sent to an asylum in Santander, where she was “Pronounced incurably insane” (Carrington and Warner. 2017. p. 3) and given Cardiazol to induce seizures, known as convulsive shock treatment believing this would cure her from her delusions. Reflecting on the



Figure 6: Portrait of Dr. Morales by Leonora Carrington, c. 1940. Pencil on Paper

experience three years later in *Down Below*:

A new era began with the most terrible and blackest day in my life. (...) I am in terrible anguish, yet I cannot continue living alone with such a memory...I know that once I have written it down, I shall be delivered. But shall I be able to express with mere words the horror of that day?

(Carrington and Warner, 2017, p.39).

Carrington's traumatic time in the asylum and her struggle with mental health heavily influenced her art, shown both in the portrait of Doctor Morales (figure 6) and *Transference* (figure 7). Lewis (2015) reiterates the importance of this link by stating, "Understanding her relationship with mental institutions is absolutely key to understanding her artistic development". After spending half a year in the asylum, she returned to Madrid and eventually arrived in Mexico, where she would spend the remainder of her life.

Shortly after moving to leaving Europe, themes in her work moved on from childhood towards more mature themes surrounding Celtic mythology and alchemical transformation (Chadwick. 2021. p.95). Suggesting that Carrington had continued to heal and work through the previous trauma of the asylum and childhood isolation upon making her way to Mexico.



Figure 7: *Transference* by Leonora Carrington, 1963. Oil paint on Hardboard.

Transference (figure 7), painted in 1963 is seen as a tribute to Carrington's psychiatrist, Doctor Fortes, who appears in a dozen different forms throughout the painting. Many drawing heavily on mythological representations from various cultures, and animalistic in their form, noting that:

"Carrington's animals identify the instinctual life with the forces of nature (...) they replace the male surrealist's reliance on the image of woman as the mediating link between man and the marvellous".

(Chadwick. 2021. p.96).

While Doctor Fortes appears a number of times, and the overall painting is surrealist in nature, his presentation is far less foreboding than the previous representation of Doctor Morales (figure 6), who is represented with dark, sunken eyes, and ghostly in his form, the portrait is in no way surrealist but captures the horror of how could possibly be treating Carrington without explicitly showing it.

The painting itself is bright in colour and overall feels more positive, suggesting a better experience throughout treatment with Doctor Fortes compared to what she had previously experienced in the asylum. The painting almost makes Doctor Fortes appear as an otherworldly figure who can heal and transform with no issue.

The work is seen to follow the standard definition of the term *Transference* as defined by the Cambridge English Dictionary (2023); "Transference, Noun: a situation in which a person who is receiving treatment transfers the thoughts and emotions they have been having about one person on to someone else, especially the person who is trying to treat them." This is also a process encouraged in some forms of therapy, or given as treatment itself, where the patient "transfers" or projects their memory onto the psychiatrist. The painting is seen as a literal interpretation of the process as the somewhat random and peculiar representations of Doctor Fortes also follows how the treatment is given:

Like any psychoanalytic approach, therapy involves patients speaking freely about whatever comes into their mind. The therapist will help them link together various thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Working in the transference refers to the idea that how someone has felt about and responded to other people in their life will also emerge in the therapy sessions.

(GMMH NHS FT. 2023).

This is seen in the way that Doctor Fortes' human form is contained in a box in the centre of the painting while his surroundings represent himself over and over again, indicating perhaps the feelings or thoughts that come to Carrington in the psychotherapy sessions. This also continues to reflect her fascination with mythology, as proven further by Chadwick (2021, p. 96): "Her intimate relationship with the childhood worlds of fantasy and magic is capable of creative transformation through mental rather than sexual power".

It is known that Carrington found the "theoretical and judgemental side of surrealism extremely distasteful" (Chadwick. 2021. p.17), perhaps because of the deeply personal nature of her paintings, and unwillingness to explain what they mean to

other people, whether this was to maintain their mysterious quality or to avoid having to re-explain and re-experience the struggles that influenced the creation of her work. Often also identifying her paintings as windows into another world or a dreamscape (Hessel and Moorhead. 2019). Interestingly, like Kahlo, and despite the surreal representations of creatures and people alike, she also never identified as a surrealist, seemingly because the subject of her work was primarily autobiographical, metaphors for events she experienced (Chadwick. 2021. p.67).

Paul Nash:

Paul Nash, Born in 1889, was a British landscape painter and war, whose childhood in Buckinghamshire greatly influenced his admiration for landscapes, particularly the Whittenham Clumps, which he described as the pyramids of his small world and considered them to have a religiousness surrounding them. This kindled his fondness for landscapes with ancient history, such as stone circles and Iron Age hill forts (The Art Story, 2023).

Nash went on to study at the Slade, although he found himself struggling to draw the human figure, so he began creating “decorative” landscapes and eventually giving the nature in these paintings a degree of personification and expressing what he identified to be “Genius Loci”, meaning the spirit of the place (Montagu, 2003, p. 10), believing the world around him was sentient. The trees in his paintings would later become a substitute for the human form.



Figure 8: We are making a new world by Paul Nash, 1918. Oil on canvas.

The spirit of a location, as felt in Nash’s development as an artist, may also be referring to the location portrayed in the work, as well as to the souls lost there, ultimately giving the place an air of something, an element of personification, a different type of life force giving the surrounding a vibrance or darkness as left behind by a time in history. It is noted that, more often than not, English artists used the natural world as a canvas for projecting a disquieting or unnerving feeling (Chadwick. 2021. p.192), and this can be seen in much of Nash’s work

He later enlisted in the army in 1914, and by 1917, he was on the frontline in Belgium when a substantial portion of his unit was killed. Nash considered himself lucky to be

alive, and soon after, he was appointed as an official war artist (The Art Story, 2023). The paintings Nash started to create at this time depicted nature as having been murdered by humankind but also paralleling the environment around him to how he may have felt after fighting in and surviving a war. It is also thought that Nash used the landscape as a vessel for the emotions felt throughout the wars, as according to Tate (2016) he “Turned the English landscape into an echo chamber of his own mind”.

“There are two worlds. There's the world, the surface that we see, and the emotions, the history, the psychology of what lies beneath something” (HENI Talks, 2017). While deciphering this comment, one could look deeper within “...the world, the surface that we see...” and ascertain that this refers to the world that most people perceive as a peaceful and familiar place of safety, security, and calm. The latter part of the quote, “...the emotions, the history, the psychology of what lies beneath something,” refers to the fear, sadness, and terror of what has gone into maintaining the landscape as they see it. The trauma of battle – for both the artist and his comrades – identifies that there are people in this world who will view the landscape significantly differently due to these experiences.



Figure 9: Harbour and Room by Paul Nash, 1932-36. Oil on Canvas

As Nash continued to paint throughout the 1920s and 30s and into World War 2, his imagery grew ever more anthropomorphic and richer in symbolism as he experimented further with abstraction and surrealism, this newfound surrealist quality in his work can be seen especially in *Harbour and Room* (Figure 9), painted just after Nash had stayed in France in 1930, where the reflection in the mirror made it seem as though the war ships in the harbour outside were entering his hotel room. (tate.org. 2022). The image of the ships invading the space of the room echoes feelings of possibly still being in the war, or still experiencing thoughts and feelings associated with it. However, considering the time in which it was painted, it could also be an indicator of the looming possibility of yet another war, with the international tensions in Europe increasing yet again throughout the 1930s.

It is thought that surrealism was quickly accepted in England, or by English artists, due to the pre-existing popularity of romanticism and “feeling over intellect, emotion over reason.” (Chadwick. 2021. p. 192). Especially important when considering surrealism in the context of Nash’s work, as it was known he was inspired by romanticists such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti early on in his career as an artist, so naturally, his work grew to be more and more surreal as time went on and wars were fought, as these were deeply emotional and traumatising times for many involved and identified further in the following quote as he wrote in his 1949 autobiography:

“it is unusual in English surrealism for the place to provide phenomenon ... but here in Avon Gorge, I had no doubt whatever that it was the natural features and spirit of the place that inspired irrational dreams ... these elements (of nature) brewed a magic for the imagination which mounted to the brains of prosaic engineers unsettling their equilibrium and releasing into their troubled thoughts, poetic visions, and schemes of paranoia”.

(Chadwick, W. 2021. p. 192).

From understanding what we are aware of from Nash’s history, it could be that both the landscape itself, as well as his possible relationship with religion, could both represent safety and uncertainty for the artist, especially if, due to the nature of the artist's trauma related to war and battle, as well losing comrades could lead him to question the safety and reliability of his surroundings as well as the deities he has come to turn to for spiritual support and guidance.

Conclusion

Each artist has used paint as an expressive medium to exorcise their own “demons”, psychologically moving internal thoughts to an external place. The artists tackle difficult subjects that many people will not have experience of and cannot empathise. Imagery used is personal for both Kahlo and Carrington and could be perceived as being surrealist due to possible limitations of understanding in the viewer. Kahlo and Carrington painted themselves and the human form to represent their experiences also projected their feelings through visual metaphors and representations of others. Kahlo did not go to art school, so the ideas she was getting across were more important than technical ability; however, Carrington and Nash both have artistic training, although Nash’s was limited to one year, which affects their styles in diverse ways, also affecting the images are perceived.

Art is seen as a grounding act by painting what they are feeling it transfers this to another form and puts working through feelings and emotions into a present context. Being able to share their work creates an opportunity to not feel alone and form individual situations where both artists and viewers can explore meaning and act as a catharsis of experiences. Art is important for mental health; by doing so, artists can reflect on what they have been through and understanding their experiences better helps them to create connections to move on. This can be seen especially in both Carrington and Kahlo’s work.

The immediacy of the medium and pictorial qualities create a more accessible platform to explore memories and trauma without having to labour to find specific words. There is bravery in showing innermost feelings and emotions by allowing these images to be analysed by the viewer, which could also be considered part of the process.

Memories such as those discussed in this thesis can be distorted by the intense feelings associated with them and then can be conveyed by imagery, paint strokes and colours. This is particularly relevant to Nash, as there is no self-representation in his work, instead using nature as a vessel to convey his feelings and emotions towards the wars. He uses landscape metaphorically to symbolise loss, destruction, and a changing world, speaking to a nation of shared experiences through the landscape; while it is not explicit, it is relatable to the generation of people who lived through these events. Conveying a sense of time and place. As previously stated, Nash was fascinated by landscapes with history, and his paintings show it in an immediate sense. His work illustrates a considered brush stroke, transferring energy and feeling onto the landscape. As time progressed his work got more surreal.

Concluding that each artist found solace in their work after experiencing trauma and that in each case it was beneficial for the artist to communicate their experiences, no matter how literal or metaphorical in their representations.

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