

Betrayal

Size in art matters – or, at least, is significant. When the twenty-five-year-old Picasso set about painting *Les Femmes d'Alger* in 1907 he was little known outside a select circle; and the huge canvas was not exhibited publicly for nine years. But in choosing to attempt his largest canvas to date, just short of two-and-a-half metres tall and nearly as wide, he was making a statement. Not only was he attempting to reconfigure the style of some past and present masters – El Greco, Gauguin, Cézanne and Matisse – but he was also aiming to present the viewer with an imposing and unforgettably searing vision of life, stripped of traditional decorum and classical ideals. The Mexican painter Frida Kahlo likewise aspired to achieve something grand, even theatrical, when in 1939 she briefly set aside her usual quite small, and domestic-sized canvases and tackled the nearly two-and-a-half metre wide panel that became *The Wounded Table*.

The context was the imminent approach of the *International Exhibition of Surrealism* that was to open in January 1940 in Mexico City. Kahlo had first met the leader of the French surrealists, André Breton, in 1938 when he came to Mexico and visited her and her husband, the famous muralist Diego Rivera, together with the exiled communist leader Leon Trotsky who was then staying with them. Enchanted by her, Breton memorably described her art as ‘a ribbon around a bomb’, and claimed he saw ‘pure surreality’ in her work, though she had had no prior knowledge of the surrealist movement. Lured by the prospect of a solo exhibition, Kahlo travelled to Paris in January 1939, only to find Breton had arranged nothing. An alternative show was quickly planned, and the Louvre acquired a painting of hers from it; but she always remained disdainful of ‘this bunch of cuckoo lunatic sons of bitches of surrealists’ with their talk of poetry and the unconscious. However, the 1940 exhibition in Mexico City – the first major exhibition of the surrealist movement in her home country – was her big chance to impress.

She submitted two extraordinarily large paintings: *Two Fridas* 1939, which was finished some months before, and *The Wounded Table*, which Kahlo was still working on just days before the exhibition opened. In a letter to her close friend and former lover Nickolas Muray in January 1940, she writes she was working ‘like hell’ to finish the painting. She also reveals that she was feeling ‘lousy’ (‘Every day worse and worse’.) After many bruising years of an on-off relationship, and affairs on both sides, her divorce with Rivera had been finalised on 6 November. At the same time, she had had more traction to help sort out the pain in her weak and damaged spine; a fungal infection in her hand made it painful for her to paint; and she had started to drink heavily. And yet she clearly was determined to create an impact in this exhibition. Although she genuinely preferred to work on small canvases, not least because she often needed to sit, or even

lie in bed, while painting because of her ailments, it seems that she wanted to prove that she was capable of producing grand statements, of a scale that could at least rival that of her husband who was famous for his massive mural paintings. (In fact, Rivera's submissions to this exhibition turned out to be smaller than Kahlo's works.)

All Kahlo's works are about herself. This was her unique and defining trademark as an artist, expressed typically through an imagery that situated her 'self' amid the characters and events of her personal life, and also within the context of the contemporary drive towards reclaiming Mexico's indigenous culture (an impulse that played a determining role in the art and political beliefs of both Kahlo and Rivera). 'My subjects have always been my sensations, my moods and the profound reactions that life has produced within me', she wrote in October 1939. She went on to say that she aimed to crystallise, or 'objectify', these emotions in her repeated images of herself, 'as sincere and as real as I could make them for the expression of what I felt for myself and before myself'.

How, then, was Kahlo's intensely personal and introspective imagery to achieve a grand scale? For *The Wounded Table* Kahlo chose two powerful pictorial traditions to frame, and give greater resonance to, her self-representation.

The first was the metaphor of life as a performance on stage. In her wide painting, theatre curtains frame the scene, while a tipped-up stage and painted backdrop complete the viewer's sense of watching some sort of allegorical play. Kahlo's work was grounded in realism and close observation but it also embraced the theatrical possibilities of disguise, pretence and fantastical narratives.

The second was the Christian iconography surrounding Christ's Last Supper and his impending betrayal by one of his disciples, Judas. As in traditional depictions of the Last Supper, Kahlo (who, like Christ at his death, was then thirty-three) placed herself at the centre of a table. Standing behind her with one arm around her shoulder is a large 'Judas figure'. In Mexican villages and towns on the Saturday before Easter, Judas figures made from bamboo and papier-mâché, with sometimes the faces of hated politicians or notorious criminals, were hoisted above the gathered crowds and exploded, limb by limb, through fireworks attached to them. Kahlo had such a Judas figure in her home, dressed, as shown in the painting, in Rivera's overalls. Although the overalls may have been a domestic joke, the symbolism linking Rivera with Judas in the painting was obvious: notwithstanding their open marriage, Rivera's persistent philandering and his affair with Kahlo's own sister had been a source of heartbreak for her.

To Kahlo's other side is a terracotta figurine, a grave good from the Nayarit region of Mexico. Kahlo's arm has become one with the figure and offers a cup to the inanimate object. The implication was that Kahlo was indissolubly linked with her Mexican identity – and accepted the obligation to make the sacrifices necessary to preserve it.

The other elements expressed different aspects of her thoughts about herself. Based on an actual life-size papier-mâché figure, the female skeleton seems to have symbolised both death and Kahlo herself. In the painting it is shown with an injury to the pelvic area, in the same place that Kahlo herself was pierced by a metal railing in a horrific accident she suffered in 1925; it is strapped to a chair in a way that recalls the years that Kahlo was in traction or had to wear a back brace; and the right foot is missing toes just like Kahlo's own foot (she had some toes amputated in 1934, as a consequence of the polio she suffered from as a child).

The deer was Kahlo's pet deer (she kept many animals in her home). Immersed in the folklore of indigenous Mexican peoples, Kahlo may have known that the Nahuatl people believed that different parts of the human anatomy were governed by various animal types, and that the right foot – Kahlo's damaged limb – was associated with deer.

Finally, the children were faithful portraits of Kahlo's niece and nephew, Antonio and Isolda, children of her sister Cristina. Cristina had had an affair with Rivera some years previously, a betrayal that Kahlo had found devastating. The presence of the children may symbolise Kahlo's sadness at her inability to bear children or, perhaps more likely, may allude to this episode.

At the heart of this painting was the theme of betrayal. Kahlo may well have considered herself betrayed by fate (the bout of polio when a child and the tram accident when she was eighteen), by her body (she underwent a seemingly unending series of operations), and by those around her (her husband and her sister). At the centre of the painting is a table with human feet, dripping blood from its 'wounds'. There is a sense that the table – the subject of the work's title – can be seen as another representation of Kahlo or what Kahlo felt about herself. 'Sadness is portrayed in all my painting, but that is my condition', she once said. 'I can't be fixed.'

The Wounded Table was certainly not lost in the midst of the surrealist exhibition. Struck by the painting's macabre aspects, one critic urged visitors to look out for 'this marvel ... I am left frightened before a painting of somnambulist horror.' But its future was not secured either. Kahlo hoped to send *The Wounded Table* to an exhibition in a New York gallery but this came to nothing, and in June 1940 she wrote to Rivera, 'unfortunately I don't believe my work has interested anyone. There's no reason why they should be interested and much less that I should believe that they are.'

The painting appears to have hung in her home until 1946 when, it seems, she entrusted it to the Russian ambassador in Mexico, possibly with a view that it should be given to a museum in Moscow. Notes of an interview she gave to a reporter in 1949–50 confirm this but do not reveal any details. Both Kahlo and Rivera were committed communists and like a number of other artists in Mexico were keen to exhibit and gave some of their works to communist countries around the world. In the 1950s Kahlo became more and more fervent in her communist beliefs, and worshipped the Soviet leader Stalin. In July 1954, just a few days before she died, she took part in a

demonstration against the CIA-sponsored coup against the democratically elected President of Guatemala, while in a wheelchair and against her doctor's orders.

The last trace we have of *The Wounded Table* is the catalogue of an exhibition of Mexican art held in Warsaw, Poland, in February 1955. The catalogue does not indicate who then owned the painting, but it does refer to a 'museum in Moscow' among the lenders. It is possible, though unproven, that this painting was then owned by a Soviet museum. However, all subsequent attempts to trace the work have failed. Given that betrayal was a major theme in the painting, it is perhaps ironic that Kahlo's faith in the people to whom she entrusted this major work should also have been betrayed. It was a painting that was intended to be hung in a public gallery and to be seen by many, but it has been lost for over half a century.

Things lost, however, may sometimes be found. Rivera was with Kahlo on the demonstration against American involvement in deposing the President of Guatemala in 1954 and in that year painted a large canvas ironically titled *Glorious Victory*, showing the director of the CIA shaking hands with the leader of the coup d'état, with workers slaughtered at their feet. The mural was shipped to Warsaw in 1956 for an exhibition that travelled around a number of Eastern European countries. It went missing for fifty years and was only recently rediscovered in a storeroom in the Pushkin Museum in Moscow and returned to public display in Mexico. The whereabouts of Kahlo's missing work are unknown, but it is remains not inconceivable that this ambitious and imposing canvas might yet come to light.

Text—
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