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Introduction to the Literature

Frida Kahlo, a disabled revolutionary German-Mexican artist of the 20th century, married Diego Rivera in 1929, adding the label of ‘wife’ to her list of identities. For some art historians, ‘disabled’ and ‘wife’ become the focus of their study on Kahlo’s life and works. This narrow scope ignores historical and social contexts of each work and the artist herself, creating a gendered analysis. Their analyses assume personal emotion drives the motivation behind Kahlo’s work, and deny her any agency outside of the domestic sphere. While many art historians verify Kahlo participates in political debates, they do not consider how this informs her artworks. Other art historians prefer to acknowledge not only Frida’s social relationships in the private sphere, but also in the public sphere. By increasing the context of each piece, such as including historical movements and social normalities of the time, art historians gain a deeper understanding of Kahlo and her agency. The link between her engagement in social and political movements, as well as an understanding of the gendered social norms existing in Mexico at the time, adds an entirely new level to Kahlo’s works that almost always defy interpretations assuming an emotionally driven, tragedy built artist.

In this paper, I will introduce two book chapters by Sarah Lowe and Margaret Lindauer, respectively, and a journal article by Marlene Goldsmith to explore the various way historians draw conclusions about Frida Kahlo, including analyzing and contextualizing the way they inform their argument. An important part of this paper will be understanding whether or not the author uses a national or international context to support their research, as it either broadens or narrows the mindset in which we view Kahlo’s works. This vital aspect will be inform us whether the author attempts to understand how Kahlo’s identities interact with one another in
society, rather than how they function solely in the domestic sphere. While authors Lowe and Lindauer view Kahlo’s works considering national historical and social context, resulting in an analysis crediting Kahlo with social and political agency, Goldsmith’s international philosophical perspective of her work enforces a one-dimensional, gendered scope, amounting Kahlo to nothing more than a wife dealing with her personal tragedies.

The Literature

The first author I present is Sarah Lowe, author of *Frida Kahlo* (1991). The specific chapter under speculation is “The Self Portraits.” Lowe argues that Kahlo is influenced by both her inner psychic self with her public self,¹ acknowledging her multiple identities as a woman, as a Mexican, and as a disabled person.² This national perspective tells the reader that the author will be examining social and historical contexts of Kahlo’s work, which she does by thoroughly explaining why Frida Kahlo may have made specific artistic decisions. In addition, primary documents such as diary entries or essays are referenced, as well as direct quotes from interviews Kahlo or her friends gave. Other peer reviewed sources are referenced when consulting paintings, such as articles by Hayden Herrera. Lowe also gives a brief history of the purpose and development of the self portrait throughout various eras, citing several academic material.

Lowe’s discussion of Kahlo’s self portraits primary focus on visual analysis of the works themselves, rather than including much bibliographical information. The format of the chapter relies on the reader reading the prior chapters of the book focusing on the life of Kahlo. In order for this chapter to be an effective and informational source, the user must already have a

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² Lowe, 34.
knowledge of Kahlo’s life, from early childhood through adulthood. Otherwise, the context and content provided only informs the reader of social and historical context of being a Mexican woman in a specific time, and how it may have influenced Kahlo’s specific work. Lowe argues Kahlo identifies with the Mater Dolorosa, who is often depicted shedding tears of sorrow for her lost son.³ She supports her argument by explaining Kahlo uses symbolic tears on her own face in portraits, likely referencing her three miscarriages/abortions.⁴ While this argument provides a cultural reference to Mexico’s Mater Dolorosa, and informs the reader that women in Mexico are expected to bear children as a duty, it also assumes the reader knows the circumstances of Kahlo’s inability to bear children, and that she is devastated by it. This statement will be challenged by a later article by Lindauer.

The visual analyses do not mention prior arguments of art historians, rather it simply creates its own argument based off of given contexts. The image is first described, then broken down. For example, in Self Portrait with Cropped Hair (1940),⁵ Lowe discusses the social significance of the lyrics portrayed in the image, explaining they point that the status of a woman is dependent upon material things that signify societal significance, such as clothing, manner of conduct, or physical beauty.⁶ In the image, Kahlo is dressed in a men’s suit, and has cut her hair off with scissors into a short look typically adorned by men. She wears earrings and women’s shoes, her facial features are androgynous, and her hair is strewn around her. Kahlo lives in a time where any deterrence from the strict gender binary results in societal dissociation. Therefore, Kahlo’s work challenges this assumed normality by portraying herself with short hair

³ Lowe, 47.
⁴ Lowe, 48.
⁶ Lowe, 59.
in a men’s suit, resisting prescribed modes of behavior for women supported by society, finding herself disenfranchised since she is displaying both prescribed male and female features. This piece encourages her audience to question gender expectations and challenges them to continue to view her as a woman.\(^7\)

The second chapter I present is titled “Frida as a Wife/Artist in Mexico” which can be found in Margaret Lindauer’s book *Devouring Frida* (2011). Like Lowe, she focuses on a national context, examining Frida’s role as a woman within the context of postrevolutionary Mexico, thereby including historical and social context as well. She argues the social category of the artist is typically a masculine one, and Kahlo crosses this gendered boundary by being both a wife and an artist.\(^9\) She seeks to prove that Kahlo’s self portraits create a vehicle for critical insight to social and historical contexts,\(^10\) crediting the artist more agency for political and social statements than an author who may only interpret Kahlo’s art through a gender encoded eye, leading to an analysis presuming Kahlo’s thoughts and private emotion drive her works.\(^11\) Lindauer consistently emphasizes the importance of remembering how gender binaries are carried on and why it is so important to deconstruct analyses of artwork:

> When interpretations do not consider how social categories of women, artist, and man are produced historically and culturally, they may cast gender difference as a final, irreducible concept in which men and women are qualitatively, essentially different kinds of people, and may thereby disregard the processes that perpetuate gender definition and significance...Kahlo’s paintings, and interpretations of them, offer tangible examples of how dominant discourses inscribe repressive binary definition. (51)

\(^7\) Lowe, 59.  
\(^8\) Lowe, 60.  
\(^10\) Lindauer, 22.  
\(^11\) Lindauer, 22.
Lindauer supports her thesis by providing a biography of Kahlo as relevant to each work, and offering critiques of art historians, specifically Herrera and Richmond, among others. She refutes their gendered arguments and provides primary source materials that suggest her analysis has grounds. By the end of her argument for each work, the viewer is left with no further ‘what-if’s’ or ‘but what abouts,’ because Lindauer has already refuted it.

In her visual analyses, Lindauer is sure to include biography, another historian’s interpretation, a refute with social and historical context as well as a primary source and a new reading of Kahlo’s work. For example, while discussing *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932), Lindauer begins by explaining the social expectations of Mexican women to bear children, and that women were expected to have an intense desire to procreate. Therefore, Kahlo’s work is interpreted by Herrera as Kahlo surrounding herself by symbols of maternal failure, because it is assumed she has a maternal desire. However, Lindauer explains Kahlo likely did not actually care to have children, pulling quotes from a letter to Dr. Leo Eloesser from Kahlo where she explains children would come ‘in third or fourth place’ to Diego and her art. This primary source essentially refutes the assumption Kahlo- who is a Mexican woman, who are expected to bear children- wants to have a child at all. Lindauer adds her own interpretation of the work by contextualizing it within postrevolutionary Mexican issues:

[In relationship to postrevolutionary issues,] the miscarriage neither counts toward the perpetuation of family nor promotes symbolic stabilization. As [David] Lomas explains, Kahlo’s detailed rendering of objects within an imaginary scene including a hospital bed on an industrial landscape is an ‘awkward disjuncture between two pictorial modes- schematic and naturalistic,’ which can, given critical analysis, ‘render visible a blindspot’ or unspoken narrative inscribed in cultural discourse. (33).

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13 Lindauer, 27.

14 Lindauer, 27.

15 Lindauer, 28.
As made clear in her letter, Kahlo did not have a ‘yearning desire’ for children. Rather, motherhood is an afterthought. So, by rejecting the esteemed female role of having a child, thus obtaining feminine fulfillment, then she must desire a masculine position.\(^{16}\) This is a reading Herrera or other historians would never achieve without expanding their analyses to include social and historical context while researching Kahlo’s works.

Lindauer’s chapter is convincing and accessible to readers interested in using the source, as biographical information is not assumed to be known, and is explained as it becomes relevant. It also provides thorough support by pulling in other interpretations and deconstructing why it is incorrect, incorporating other contexts and sources into the mix to refute the analysis. After proving her point, Lindauer provides a new interpretation that synthesizes all of her sources and contextual information for a reading that gives Kahlo agency in her social world and the political sphere.

The last article I will discuss is Marlene Goldsmith’s *FRIDA KAHLO: Abjection, Psychic Deadness, and the Creative Impulse* (2004).\(^ {17}\) Goldsmith takes a completely different approach to analyzing Kahlo’s works. She works with an international context, applying specific philosophies of art to Kahlo’s paintings. She argues that Kahlo’s life and work reveal a psyche that is re-creating psychological aliveness from out of the numbness and deadness arising from her many tragic life experiences.\(^ {18}\) To support her argument, she incorporates psychological journals and psychoanalysts’, such as Ehrenzweig, opinions and research. She uses primary source documents, such as poems from Kahlo’s diary, and quotes from interviews of Kahlo and

\(^{16}\) Lindauer, 33.


\(^{18}\) Goldsmith, 723.
her friends. However, because Goldsmith is using a philosophy framework that is considered ‘universal’ to the human experience, she fails to incorporate social, historical, and national cultural context in her analyses.

Goldsmith relies heavily on creative processes and theoretical explorations to carry her interpretations of Kahlo’s works. For example, her analysis of *My Nurse and I* (1937) looks to follow the theory Ehrenzweig proposes by claiming Kahlo (in the image) is the sacrifice offered to the White Goddess and her death embrace, therefore the death symbolizes the dissolution of the ego, which is the first step in his theory of creativity. The nurse symbolizes both the nurturer and bringer of death, and Kahlo becomes a symbol of life’s continuity, which Goldstein claims is connected to her tragic past. Kahlo has been able to endure the pains and trials life has thrown at her up to this point, and it is reflected in her painting. The painting embraces brutality, life, and passion from which comes Kahlo’s art.

As previously stated, Goldsmith relies on philosophy and excludes much key contextual evidence when analyzing Kahlo’s works. This particular article is an engaging read, but brings to question if there is truly a universal human experience we can whittle down to be applied to a creative process. There are too many ‘what-ifs’ and ‘but what about’s’ for the creative theories to be applied to every artist, and Kahlo in particular. Art historians have been able to do research proving there is much more to her artwork than her personal tragedies, which is the lens this particular source views her through. The lens is gendered, and assumes that Kahlo, a female

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20 Goldsmith, 750.
21 Goldsmith, 751.
22 Goldsmith, 751.
artist, is stuck on her emotional tragedies and sense of self rather than having the agency to create political and engaging works.

**Conclusion**

After reviewing the three sources, it is clear the two chapters by Lowe and Lindauer provide the most accredited analyses due to their acknowledgement of historical, social and national cultural context. They both cite other sources who can support their interpretations, and Lindauer takes it a step further to refute other interpretations before constructing her own. In addition, biographical information assists the reader in contextualizing why certain arguments are made at specific moments in Kahlo’s life. These analyses give Kahlo agency in her life and artwork. Comparatively, Goldsmith’s interpretations have many holes, a major one being the attempt to put an individual’s situation into universal, international context, and disregarding other contexts that would alter the analyses. Her arguments are philosophy based, and relies heavily on the idea Kahlo’s works are inspired by her personal tragedies rather than the intensely gendered social context she lives in, giving her zero agency.


Kahlo, Frida. Self Portrait with Cropped Hair. 1940.
