

## **Sarah Wiseman Gallery visits 'Frida Kahlo: Making Herself Up'**

### **Victoria and Albert Museum**

#### **By Sarah Lacey**

It's a stifling London June mid-morning. We are weaving our way at speed through the V&A galleries, before finding ourselves at a large, blue-lit entryway, already packed with people, eager to see something of the life of the legendary painter Frida Kahlo. For this now is the V&A's specialism, like the block-busting Bowie and McQueen exhibits before, it's a multi-sensory experience, where visitors are sealed away with the artefacts in windowless galleries, bathed in coloured lights and surrounded by an ambient soundtrack.

If it's a complete survey of Frida's paintings you're expecting to see, then you may be disappointed. Although there are many important paintings that are dotted throughout the show, this is really an examination of Kahlo's life, the real woman behind the self-portraits, through the most intimate of her belongings - and it's no less powerful for it.

The early part of the exhibition is devoted to Kahlo's early life, with photographs of her as a child, and teenager already experimenting with costume. There are images made by her father Guillermo Kahlo, a well-known photographer tasked with documenting many of the more famous architectural land-marks of Mexico. Other objects include a selection of votive paintings, a tradition of Mexico, customarily made by ordinary people in response to recovering from accident or illness. These quirky examples of folk-art are a clear influence on Kahlo's later paintings.

A touching addition was a smattering of family photographs with heads and faces chopped out. These were a few of hundreds of photographs that were found, and it's unclear what these images were used for, or where the snipped-out faces ended up. They seemed like a poignant representation her shortened life, like an unfinished thought.

Famously, the personal objects are among the vast store discovered behind her bathroom at The Blue House in 2004, fifty years after she died at the age of 47. This collection included not only her costumes, but her letters, photographs, as well as the apparatus associated with her un-ending health problems and pain she endured – the back braces, prostheses and built up shoes. It was decreed by Diego Rivera, her husband, that this trove in its entirety be sealed away from prying eyes until after his death. I'd love to have been a fly on the wall when it was uncovered; I like to imagine it was something akin to the discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb.

Some critics have said that this display is exploitative of Kahlo's memory, that this is not the way she wanted to be remembered or should be remembered. Indeed, it did feel rather as if I'd personally been rifling through her drawers by examining her half-used lipsticks and nail-varnishes; that this might be prying too far into her private rituals. However, the display of casts and body-braces is respectfully and sensitively handled. Far from being ghoulish relics, I felt that it was testimony to Frida's endurance, and a part of her life that cannot be ignored. Frida herself included them in her art; one brace displayed is strikingly similar to the one depicted in her painting 'The Broken Column' (1944).

Many she decorated and painted, with hammers and sickles emblazoned across the chest; another, very movingly, has a curled foetus painted across the abdomen. Interspersed through all this are her drawings, letters from Diego and lover Nickolas Muray, a photographer who produced some of her most renowned photographic portrait images.

Finally, through a tunnel of lights, we find ourselves presented at a huge cabinet filled with her costumes, alongside her paintings, and jewellery. It's by now become clear to all that the costumes she wore are very much a part of her artistry, and the sheer quality and craftsmanship that has gone into each garment is evident; the clothes she wore employed numerous craft traditions from Mexico, worn with pride and defiance.

The paintings 'Self-Portrait with Monkeys' (1943) and 'Self Portrait as a Tehuana' (1943) are here too. I've long been an admirer of Kahlo's work, however it's a rare treat to actually see a painting of hers in the flesh. These are works that are oft-repeated images across popular culture, irritatingly re-produced on posters and tee-shirts. I find it's a real thrill to actually be able to see her tremendous gift as a painter on the wall in front of me, almost in touching distance.

I was surprised to read not long ago that some people who admire Frida Kahlo's work are actually completely unaware her physical problems, as if it's a part of her history that's been painted out. This exhibition serves to show her as not only her genius as an artist, but her humanity. She is contemporary figure because she was aware of the power of her image, and it's of little use to be squeamish about the health difficulties she faced, or worse ignore this fact completely. It's worth noting that her prosthetic leg is not only lavishly decorated, but has the addition of a bell, signalling her determination not to be shut away in silence.

*"Pain, pleasure, and death are no more than a process for existence. The revolutionary struggle in this process is a doorway open to intelligence." – Frida Kahlo*

**Frida Kahlo - Making Her Self Up**

**Sponsored by Grosvenor Britain & Ireland**

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