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The Wages of Pain

Frida by Hayden Herrera; Frida Kahlo Exhibition

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The Wages of Pain

Jane Ciabattari

Frida
by Hayden Herrera.
Harper & Row, 1983,
\$21.95 cloth.

Frida Kahlo Exhibition
at the Grey Art Gallery,
New York University, Spring 1983.

THE MEXICAN artist Frida Kahlo was born in 1907, but in a characteristically flamboyant gesture—one of her many acts of self-invention—she claimed for her birthdate the year her country's revolution began, 1910. During her lifetime she was an international figure, first as the wife of muralist Diego Rivera and later as a painter in her own right. Rivera both overshadowed her and gave her access to a circle of art patrons and intellectuals in North America and Europe, and to such artists as Louise Nevelson, Alfred Stieglitz, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Edward Weston. Sculptor Isamu Noguchi and exiled Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky were among her lovers, and André Breton claimed her for Surrealism ("They thought I was a Surrealist," she said, "but I wasn't. I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality.").

Her first one-woman show was in 1938, at the Surrealist-oriented Julien Levy Gallery in New York; this resulted in her work being reproduced in *Vogue* and *Life* and reviewed by all the major critics. The following year, Marcel Duchamp and Breton organized an exhibition in Paris where she was praised by Miro, Kandinsky, Picasso, and Tanguy, and the Louvre acquired one of her paintings. By the time of her death in 1954, she was internationally recognized, and was a national idol: she lay in state at Mexico City's Palace of Fine Arts, the cultural center of her country.

That Kahlo is a key figure in twentieth-century Mexican art is indisputable. She was schooled at Mexico City's National Preparatory School during her country's exuberant post-revolution phase of self-definition and rediscovery. As Jose Vasconcelos, father of Mexico's modern education movement, put it at the time, "We are the prodigal sons of a homeland which we cannot even define but which we are beginning at last to observe. She is Castilian and Moorish, with Aztec markings." It was a period in which the colonial and dictatorial past was being cracked away to reveal a phantasmagoria of cultural possibilities.

Unlike her colleagues—the muralists of the Mexican Renaissance—Frida Kahlo worked in small scale. Her paintings often were on tin and composed as *retablos*—*ex-voto* paintings offering thanks to religious figures for miraculous salvation. Like contemporary Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes, she drew freely from the dense layers of Mexico's past. In *My Nurse and I*,

painted in 1937, she portrays herself with an adult face and an infant's body, suckling at the breast of an Indian nurse with an impassive Teotihuacan stone mask for a face. In *Four Inhabitants of Mexico* (1938), the child Frida is surrounded by four archetypal figures: a pre-Columbian clay sculpture of a naked pregnant woman, a festival Judas figure strung with explosives, a skeleton figure



Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera

common in Day of the Dead celebrations, and a straw man on horseback, an ultimately harmless bandido.

Her images are powerful, ironic, filled with Mexican attitudes toward fate and death. As Octavio Paz writes,

One of the most notable traits of the Mexican's character is his willingness to contemplate horror. . . . The bloody Christs in our village churches, the macabre humor in some of our newspaper headlines, our wakes, the custom of eating skull-shaped cakes and candies on the Day of the Dead, are habits inherited from the Indians and the Spaniards and are now an inseparable part of our being. Our cult of death is also a cult of life, in the same way that love is hunger for life and a longing for death. Our fondness for self-destruction derives not only from our masochistic tendencies but also from a certain variety of religious emotion.

FRIDA KAHLO's role as a pioneer for creative women is one reason the interest in her life and work has been rekindled in recent years. A retrospective was mounted in Mexico City in 1977, and there have been sporadic smaller exhibits—including, for instance, a group show in homage to Frida Kahlo organized by the Galeria de la Raza in San Francisco's Mission District for Day of the Dead, 1978. Now her influence once again extends beyond the borders of her native country.

This past spring brought the publication by Harper and Row of a thorough and intriguing biography by New York art critic Hayden Herrera, and an exhibition of some sixty of her paintings at New York University's Grey Art Gallery. The show, which paired her work with the photography of Tina Modotti, originated at London's Whitechapel Gallery in 1982 and also traveled to

Frida Kahlo drew upon her own physical and emotional suffering for much of her material. She had polio as a child, and at the age of eighteen was in a terrible bus accident in which she was impaled on a steel rail, her spine, pelvis, right leg and foot crushed. The accident began what one of her friends called "the long death": she had more than thirty surgical operations, mostly on her spine and foot, as well as miscarriages and therapeutic abortions (she never was able to bear the child she yearned to have); she was in almost constant pain in her spine and right leg, and eventually underwent the amputation of her foot and leg.

But the accident also triggered her serious work as a painter. In 1944, Herrera records, Frida Kahlo told a critic that three concerns impelled her to make art: "her vivid memory of her own blood flowing during the childhood accident; her thoughts about birth, death, and the 'conducting threads of life'; and her desire to become a mother." Bedridden for months on end, she burrowed inward, creating an interior landscape from her pain and sense of loss. Herrera writes:

Painting was part of Frida Kahlo's battle for life. It was also very much a part of her self-creation; in her art, as in her life, a theatrical self-presentation was a means to control her world. As she recovered, relapsed, recovered again, she reinvented herself. She created a person who could be mobile and make mischief in her imagination rather than in her legs. "Frida is the only painter who gave birth to herself," says an intimate friend. . . . the photographer Lola Alvarez Bravo.

She painted her first *Self-Portrait* while recovering from the accident; it was a love offering to a young man she had lost. Herrera writes, ". . . it was the accident and its aftermath that led her eventually, as a mature painter, to chart her state of mind—to set down her discoveries—in terms of things done to her body: her face is always a mask; her body is often naked and wounded, like her feelings. . . . 'I paint myself because I am so often alone,' Frida said."

Frida also suffered emotionally as a result of Rivera's infidelities, which included an affair with her sister Cristina. They were divorced in 1939, and then remarried in 1940, partly because of his concern for her health. In *The Two Fridas*, painted while they were separated, she expresses her grief at losing Diego. Here she depicts her dual heritage (her mother was a beautiful mestiza from Oaxaca, her father a German Jewish photographer) by the costumes—one Frida wears a lacy Victorian dress, the other a Tehuana skirt and blouse. The first Frida has a broken heart revealed beneath her breast, the second a healthy heart. An artery joins them, and it has been clipped; droplets of blood drip onto the first Frida's white skirt. The Tehuana Frida holds a brooch with Diego's portrait.

Frida Kahlo painted dozens of self-portraits in which she stares unblinking at who she is and what has happened to her. In these paintings, little obvious artifice or craft intercedes to buffer her viewers from her experienced pain. Seeing a painting like *Henry Ford Hospital*, which is her emblematic and graphic portrayal of the miscarriage she suffered in Detroit in 1932, is an intensely private

Berlin, Hamburg, Hanover, and Stockholm. In the catalogue, Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, who organized the exhibit, address the question of the marginal status of Mexican art and women's art.

As a woman raised in a country where the ideal was the long-suffering passive mother, Frida Kahlo was an evolutionary breakthrough, an artist who was able to take both passive and active functions, to be female observed and female as observer. In 1943 an admiring Rivera wrote of her work, "Frida is the only example in the history of art of an artist who tore open her chest and heart to reveal the biological truth of her feelings." In her often searing self-portraits, the body of her autobiography, she created a coherent and enduring myth of self.

experience; at the Grey Gallery exhibition, each person who stood before the painting seemed to claim a moment of intimacy to absorb the impact of this frankly disturbing image. Without a trace of sentimentality, Frida's art chronicles her transformation from sensual young bride to bereft and betrayed wife: the outlines of her face grow coarser, the colors change from cheerful to distraught, the companions in her daily life become menacing rather than friendly.

Despite her physical frailty and her emotional dependence on Rivera, Frida

had a sturdy artistic self. She portrays herself as a figure equal in significance to the major archetypes of her country's past—as the fifth of *Four Inhabitants of Mexico*. In *My Dress Hangs There* (1933), she paints a personal symbol against the backdrop of Manhattan, which for her represented the industrial, capitalist civilization she believed was threatening her native Mexico.

And in spite of her pain, she made her life joyful in many ways. In 1979 I visited her home, now the Frida Kahlo Museum, open to the public since the year after her death. It was the home of

an invalid, clearly, but it was also saturated with color, filled with flowers and animals, pre-Columbian fertility figures and folkloric pottery, naïve colonial portraits, a room wallpapered with *retablos*. The fertility she yearned for surrounded her. On the little bed where she was confined for so many months there is a gaily painted plaster corset and above it a mirror and easel arranged so she could paint in bed. Nothing more clearly speaks of her tenacity, the creative spirit transcending physical suffering.

Frida did not succumb to silence, and

she did not follow rules. In painting her shocking and bloody images of childbirth, abortion, miscarriage, her passionate and masochistic images of victims (a woman stabbed to death by her lover in *A Few Small Nips*, a self-portrait as a deer pierced with arrows in *The Little Deer*), she took risks to convey a specifically female vision of pain. Not that she does not also speak to all of the human condition: when Frida Kahlo paints the agony of her body betraying her, she speaks to each of us, for the body is, in the end, the ultimate betrayer. □

INTERVIEW

Latin Americans in Translation: An Interview With Helen Lane

Steve Wasserman

A CHARACTER IN Gabriel García Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* remarks that fate has made us invisible. By "us" Márquez, the Colombian Nobel Laureate, meant Latin America. But in the world of contemporary literature Latin American writers and poets are highly visible. Their novels, short stories, and poems have become, for many Americans, a window on a world that is too little understood, despite the glimpses afforded by the daily headlines. The unseen heroes in this process are such American translators as Helen Lane and Gregory Rabassa, who have helped give English-speaking North Americans a view of the New World's "other literature."

Helen Lane has translated sixty-one books and is a past winner of the National Book Award. This interview was conducted in Los Angeles several months ago.

Steve Wasserman: For many years now, we have heard that the novel is dead. And yet, at least in Latin America, the novel seems very much alive. How do you account for this vitality coming as it does from nations that are given to censorship and repression?

Helen Lane: One possible function of the novel is to create a counterworld, and in Latin America the necessity for a counterworld is very great. The need for a literature that is a transmutation of reality in order to make it more bearable is recognized by almost all Latin American novelists. Just as nightmare is a mechanism of domination for children, so too is the terrifying aspect of so many Latin American novels. These writers are inventing nightmares to scare themselves and to purify themselves.

Let's compare these works for a moment with French literature. No French author these days very often asks himself the questions: Who am I? Where did I come from? How did I get here? These are constant questions for a Latin

American author. For the Latin Americans, a novel is a quest for identity. That is no longer true in Europe.

Wasserman: Doesn't the feverish, hallucinatory quality of Latin American fiction reflect not so much a counterworld as the *facts* of Latin America's reality? One thinks of Joan Didion's observation in her book *Salvador*, that it was only upon entering that benighted nation that she understood that Gabriel García Márquez was a social realist, not a surrealist.

Lane: Latin American authors are working within a long Spanish-culture tradition in which the line between the objective and the subjective, between fact and the interpretation of fact, is far less tyrannically drawn: *Don Quixote*, for example, where the impossibility of determining where the one ends and the other begins, is the novel. Where the French, say, will see a dualism between what is self and what is other, the Latin American defines himself as Himself-and-His-Circumstances.

What Latin American authors subvert is the very possibility of ever arriving at any sort of ultimate historical truth. History, they remind us, is not merely the description of an event. Description, they insist, is by its very nature an interpretation. For Latin Americans, this problem is crucial, since history is taught the way I suppose American history was taught in the nineteenth century: it is the history of heroes, vast glorification of nationalism, of national characteristics. History, for them, is a fiction. It is often much more propaganda than it is fact, as we would think of it in the northern portion of the hemisphere. This makes it very easy for Latin American writers to slip between the realms of history and fiction. What Latin Americans have taken for history has been a sucker-game played, wittingly or unwittingly, by historians holding crooked cards. But, of course, we have our attempts, too. One thinks of Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*, the so-called school of "faction."

Wasserman: But when historical events are still fresh—as in Vietnam or the

Holocaust—isn't this procedure ethically suspect?

Lane: Certainly it's disturbing. We like to think we can distinguish between fiction and reality. Once the line is blurred, it can make the whole world seem unstable. But poets and writers and artists are not engaged on a search for truth. They are embarked on a quest for meaning.

Wasserman: If the nineteenth century was the century of the novel, then perhaps one reason that the novel is still so alive in Latin America is that the continent is still grappling with all the problems that the industrialized world tussled with a hundred years ago.

Lane: It's even more complicated than that. Societies in Europe and America, except in tiny enclaves, no longer contain groups who live according to cyclical time, as do countless Indians in Latin America. Many Latin American authors—especially Octavio Paz, and, of course, Gabriel García Márquez—have been interested in cyclical time. It is a kind of ahistorical time where repetition and ritual are all, where one validates oneself by doing exactly what one's ancestors did. A sense of cyclical time is essential to any writer with the cosmic ambition of representing in his fiction an entire continent. One of the easiest ways of doing it is to set up a narrative device that reproduces cyclical time. It imparts a flavor and a dimension to Latin American novels that is missing altogether from European and American literature.

I'm also convinced that the airplane has much to do with the surreal aspect of Latin American fiction and also the rhythm of it. One forgets that almost all important travel in Latin America is by airplane. The sudden shift of place and time can be seen in the fiction. Latin American prose rhythms are fast.

Wasserman: What role has exile played in shaping Latin American writers?

Lane: Almost all great writers have experienced exile and prison. Part of the richness of Latin American writing is that so many authors—the vast majority—are now exiles. I think that exile always helps literature. Being outside of your own country, whether willingly or unwillingly, gives you a very different perspective. You are able to see your own country in comparison with other cultures, and you appreciate what is specific and individual about your own culture as you never can from inside it.

Wasserman: Gabriela Mistral, the Chilean poet, once remarked that

"What unites us in Spanish America is our beautiful language and our distrust of the United States." How true is that?

Lane: It was more true twenty years ago than it is today. Latin American writers are beginning to see that the United States is not where the problem lies, that it is only a part of the problem, and that the continent's problem is partly an inner one. Thinking writers have realized that anti-Americanism is a straw man, that they have been tilting against windmills, that the problem is deeper than simply the relationship to North America. The emphasis has shifted. Today they recognize that many of Latin America's problems have historical roots in their own continent. Writers are turning to their own history for inspiration.

Wasserman: James Reston has observed that Americans will do anything for Latin America except read about it.

Lane: There's no doubt that when one goes into a bookstore, one does not see as many nonfiction books about Latin America as one does about, say, Europe, or even Africa. In a curious way, Latin America, despite its geographical proximity to the United States, remains fictive in the North American mind. Perhaps that is why people have taken to reading its fiction.

Wasserman: What book would you suggest for someone who has never read any Latin American authors?

Lane: Without question García Márquez because of his strong story-telling, and because his work is marvelously funny. Also Mario Vargas Llosa's *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*. Also Jorge Amado, who is another great story-teller. And of course Manuel Puig's *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth* and *Heartbreak Tango*. I don't think there's any better Mexican novel than *Under the Volcano* by Malcolm Lowry. Those would be fine places to jump into the Latin American waters.

Wasserman: How did you become a translator?

Lane: My husband had a very peripatetic profession. He was a transportation designer, principally automobiles, sometimes airplanes, and many of his clients were European. It meant a great deal of travel and living in many countries. So I looked around for what I could do with what I had as background and education, and decided on translation. It proved to be a marvelous solution to my problem. I call it the snail's profession: You just put your typewriter and your Webster's on your back—if you're strong enough—and go off. □