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**National College of Art & Design  
Fourth Year Painting**

**Frida Kahlo  
Realist  
Surrealist  
Existentialist**

**by  
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**Submitted to the Faculty of History of Art and Design and Complementary  
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## **Introduction**

Over forty years after her death, the work of Frida Kahlo has enjoyed a resurgence, particularly since the publication of her biography in 1983. What was the source and meaning of Kahlo's powerful and often disturbing imagery? In this thesis I explore the symbols of Kahlo in the context of the major influences that inspired her paintings.

Two important art movements, realism and surrealism, provide a framework for my investigation. It has been argued (by Breton for example) that Kahlo's work belongs to the surrealist camp. Herrera, her 1983 biographer, disputes this saying that she was a surrealist discovery rather than a surrealist.

In Chapter 1 I discuss 'realism' and 'surrealism' as movements in art with reference to the difference between penetrability of meaning and privacy of meaning in the work of Kahlo. A Freudian interpretation is used to examine her use of dismembered body parts, a feature of a number of her works.

Chapter 2 examines a number of major influences in Kahlo's work. These influences include her relationship with her father, her relationship with Rivera, her husband, and the physical pain she had to endure following her horrific streetcar accident.

In Chapter 3 I present an interpretation of eleven of Kahlo's works. These works span the 1930s and 40s and provide us with her response to periods of emotional and physical upheaval.

In the Conclusion I compare and contrast surrealist art and Mexican art in the context of Kahlo's work. I conclude with the proposal that the philosophical concept 'existentialism' is the most useful definition of the work and life, of Frida Kahlo





## Ch. 1 Realism, Surrealism, Freud and Kahlo

### Realism

The term 'Realism' in art referred originally to a movement which began around the mid 19th century in France. The peasant and labourer were depicted with a reverence previously only shown to the aristocracy. Realism sought to emulate the honest toil of a disappearing class. Kahlo engaged in a similar kind of emulation of images from Mexican Indian culture. Rivera, Kahlo's husband and renowned mural painter, desired to produce an art with "an obvious social resonance"<sup>1</sup>, as realist art in the twentieth century attempted to reflect society back to itself in an accessible manner. Cultural symbols were part of the mural paintings of her husband Rivera and were of great importance to Kahlo in her paintings. Such work was 'real' in that it provided conventional meanings for the objects represented, meanings drawn from the cultural milieu of the period in which the work was carried out, or of a period which the artist wished to emulate.

Kahlo used her own face and body as core themes in her paintings in response to the powerful and painful awareness of her body imposed by a horrific streetcar accident in her late teens. Because of this accident she was alone and bedridden for long periods of time. She used her own image to illustrate what was happening to her.

"From that time (when the accident happened) my obsession was to begin again, painting things just as I saw them with my own eyes and nothing more"<sup>2</sup>

"I paint myself because I am so often alone and because I am the subject I know best."<sup>3</sup>

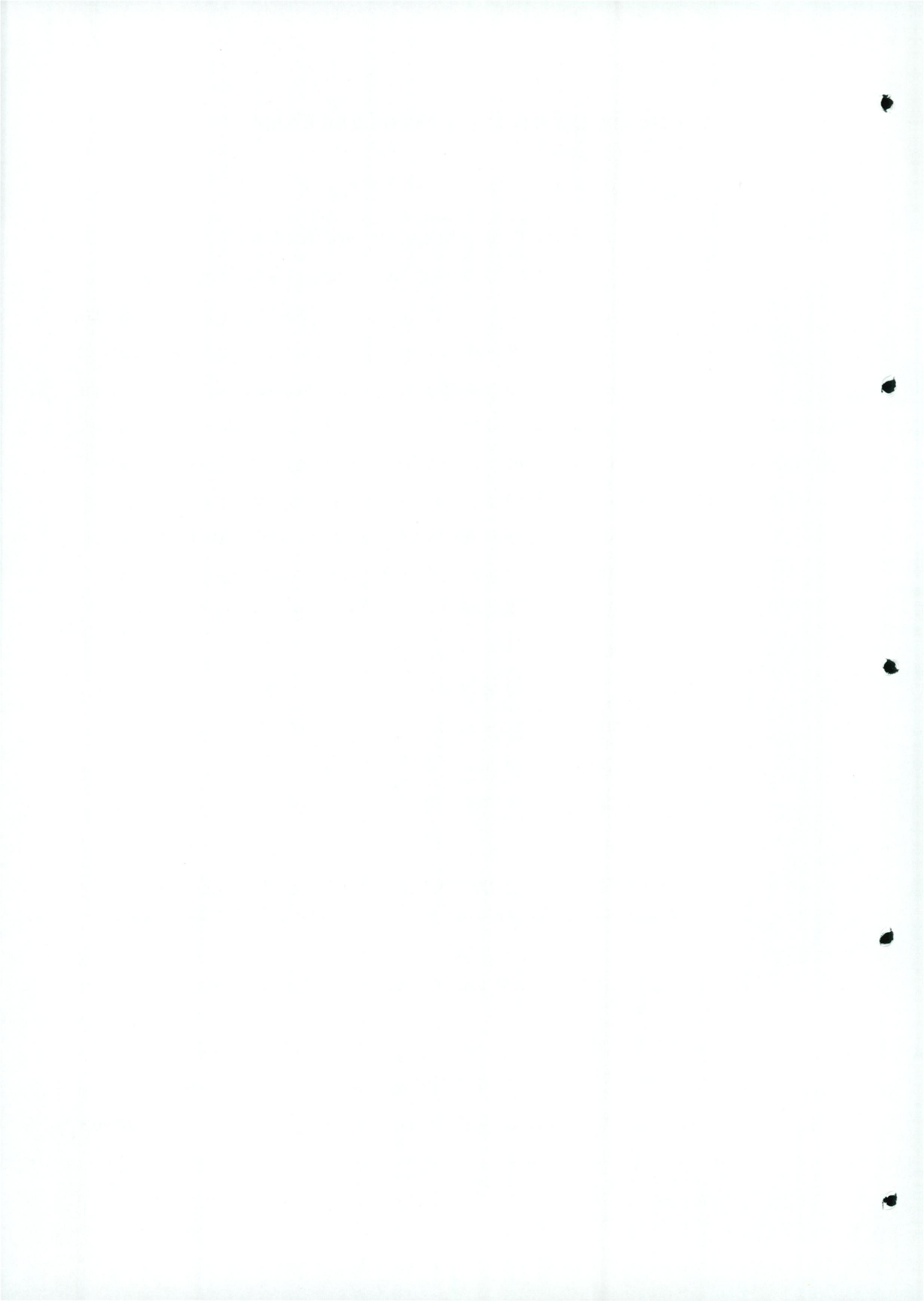
As a socialist, Kahlo wanted to overcome the idea of High Art and produce an art for the masses. She was a friend of Trotsky. One of the last photographs of her, taken in 1954, showed her demonstrating against the C.I.A. led coup in Guatemala.

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<sup>1</sup>Fer, Briony Bachelor, David Wood, Paul 1993:253

<sup>2</sup>Kahlo quoted in Taschen, 1993:19

<sup>3</sup>Kahlo quoted in Taschen, 1993:27



She related her own life and work to the culture of the common people of Mexico. She wore Indian clothing. With Rivera she collected Aztec pre-Columbian sculpture. She drew on symbols from Mexican Popular art and pre-Columbian culture. She also drew on the stylistic vernacular of retablos, votive painting of Christian saints and martyrs.

Her depiction of horror also had roots in the black humour evident in Mexican culture at the time.

Talks about Kahlo's black humour, characteristically Mexican that relishes horror and laughs at death, such as their Day of the Dead where they make edible sugar coffins and skeletons and give them to friends with their names across the forehead. These are edible and they joke and laugh about their own deaths and tell outrageous jokes about dying. Kahlo had humour like hope. Like hope this had helped her to survive her embattled life."<sup>4</sup>

Kahlo used life like detail in the symbols that she chose. The disturbing feature of her work is how she portrayed these symbols away from their everyday context in order to heighten the emotional effect:

"The objects are extracted from their normal environment and put into a different environment. Here we see a distortion of true life realism. For Kahlo it was more important for her to reproduce her emotional state in a distillation of her reality that she had experienced than to record an actual situation with photographic precision."<sup>5</sup>

According to Taschen, penetrability of meaning in Kahlo's use of symbols prevents us from defining her work as 'surrealist':

"She refers to traditions which, however surreal they may strike the European, continue to flourish in Mexican daily life even today. But although many of her works contain surreal and fantastical elements, they cannot be called Surrealist, for in none of them does she entirely free herself of reality. Her messages are never impenetrable or illogical. Fact and fiction fuse in her works, as in so many Mexican works of art, as two components of one and the same reality."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Herrera, Hayden 1993:187

<sup>5</sup>Taschen, 1993:35

<sup>6</sup>Taschen, Benedikt 1993:20



## **Surrealism**

As against the depiction of social reality found in Realism, Surrealism in art emerged as a reaction to a social world that had recently plunged itself into the devastation of the First World War. Gombrich described Surrealism as concerned mostly with dreams, nightmares and neurotic symbols.<sup>7</sup> Relying on Freud's notion of the subconscious, surrealists rejected the waking world for the private symbols of the dream world using techniques such as automatic drawing and automatic writing as well as dream images. As Klee put it, art cannot be planned but must be allowed to emerge and develop.

The name Surrealism was coined in 1924 to express the desire of up and coming artists to go beyond copying reality. This involved becoming childlike or even silly for some, while others searched science to explore the primitive psyche<sup>8</sup>. The writings of Sigmund Freud provided inspiration to the Surrealist movement, namely that waking thoughts had to be numbed in order to allow the child and the savage come to the surface. It was this analysis which led the surrealists to the belief that logical reason can produce science but cannot create art. Dreams, Freud's 'via regia' to the unconscious<sup>9</sup>, provided landscapes for the new art movement. The mental states that gave Coleridge his Kubla Khan, an elaboration of images of real things, were sought by the surrealists. Dali's 'Apparition of face and fruit-bowl on a beach' presents what is apparently a landscape, but upon closer examination reveals the head of a dog as a mountain, and its eye as a tunnel. This landscape sits on a table on which a fruit bowl also acts as the forehead of a face. These dream like elements, unlike those of Mexican Indian art, are private to Dali, the images of one artists dream rather than the images of the myths of a tribe.

Allied to Freud's emphasis on the subconscious, surrealism also shared his obsession with sexuality. Breton insists on the central position of eros in surrealism in his introduction to the International Surrealist Exhibition of 1959:

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<sup>7</sup>Gombrich, E. H. 1989:472

<sup>8</sup>Gombrich, E. H., 1989:471

<sup>9</sup>Jones, Ernest, 1957:300



"One might add that, over and above their extreme disparity of means and appearance, what in general characterises and qualifies any works of art as surrealist is, first and foremost, their erotic implications.<sup>10</sup>

Breton quotes Bataille on the conflict between social prohibition and desire which "urges us to violate it". This anxiety or conflict is part of the inner experience of eroticism. This highlights the difference between human eros and animal sexuality in that human eroticism "is that part of man's consciousness which calls his own being into question." This prohibition was central to Freud's Totem and Taboo which emphasises social control of sexual behaviour in all societies, in particular in relation to incest. The power of the taboo rests in having no reason or explanation beyond itself.<sup>11</sup> The boundary between private and public in the area of eroticism, is prudence. Surrealism breaks this boundary in favour of frankness:

"... It is indeed only at this price (of speaking frankly and avoiding prudery) that eroticism, rescued from shame, can claim the high place to which it is entitled."<sup>12</sup>

'The Two Fridas' and 'What the water gave me' are examples of what could be described as 'surrealist' paintings, relying on images that belong to the 'subconscious' of the painter. As surrealism rebelled against the 'reality' of the brutality of the social and political world that had given us the First World War, Kahlo rebelled against the 'reality' of her own pain, both physical and emotional. As surrealist work, the meaning of much of the symbolism is private to the artist and the viewer is removed from a particular time or place.

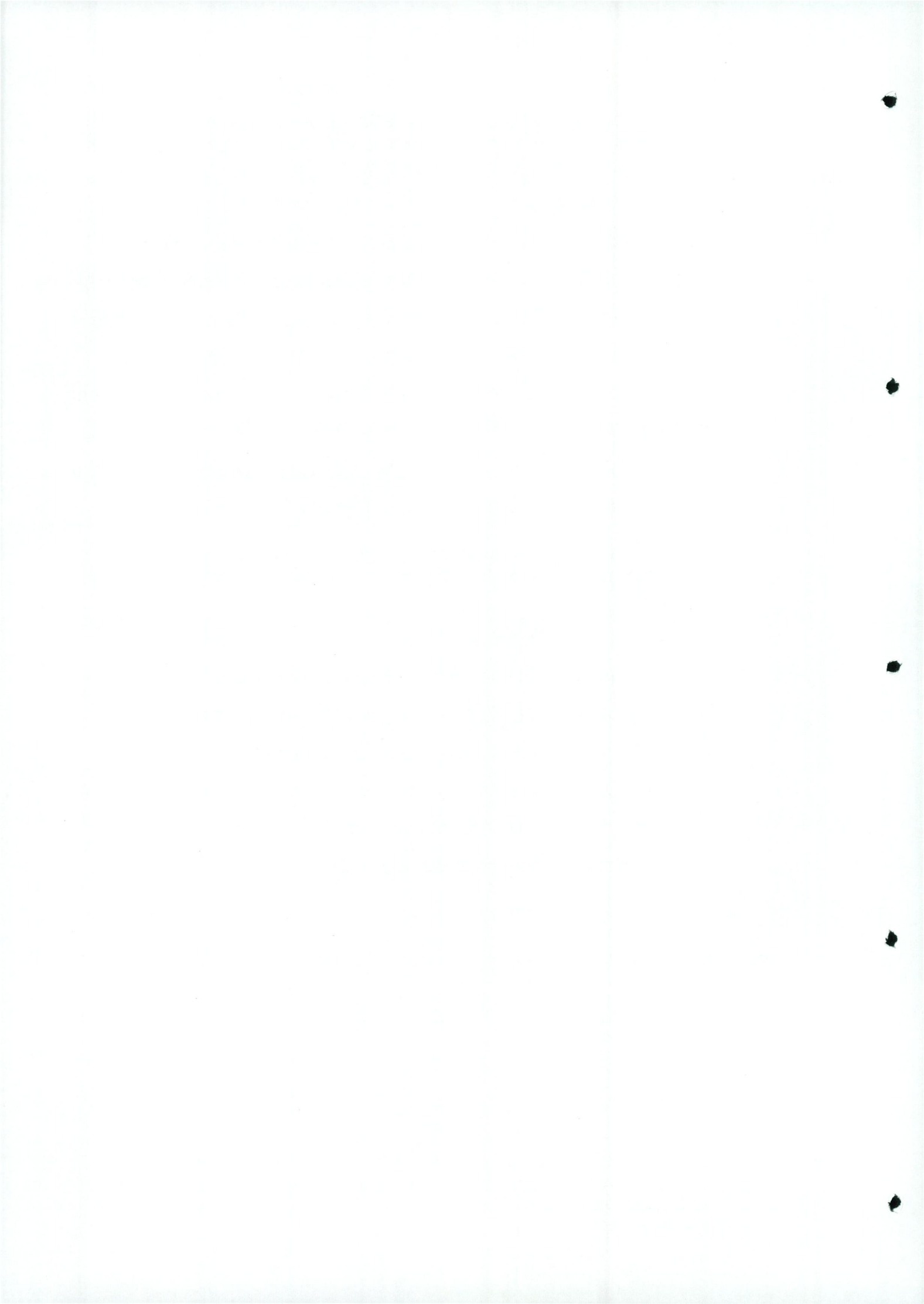
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<sup>10</sup>Breton, Andre "Introduction to the International Surrealist Exhibition (1959)" in Pierre, José, ed. 1992:170

<sup>11</sup>Jones:Ernest, 1957:370

<sup>12</sup>Breton, Andre, op.cit:171





## Freud

Freud hypothesised that the female recognised at an early age her castration but also rebelled against this state of affairs. One possible response to this, according to Freud is to cling to the hope of getting a penis:

"That hope becomes her life's aim; and the phantasy of being a man in spite of everything often persists as a formative factor over long periods. This 'masculinity complex' in women can also result in a manifest homosexual choice of object."<sup>13</sup>

In "Self Portrait with Cropped Hair" Kahlo is wearing Rivera's suit. She has no breasts. She is holding a scissors near her crotch, a Freudian symbol of castration. She is resorting to her 'masculinity complex'; her feminine self has been abandoned by Rivera. Now she is abandoning elements of her feminine self.

Freud refers to the 'uncanny' in relation to dismembered limbs in dreams. The uncanny, or the unhomely is "that which is secretly familiar and has been repressed."<sup>14</sup> What is repressed, according to Freud, is the fear of castration.

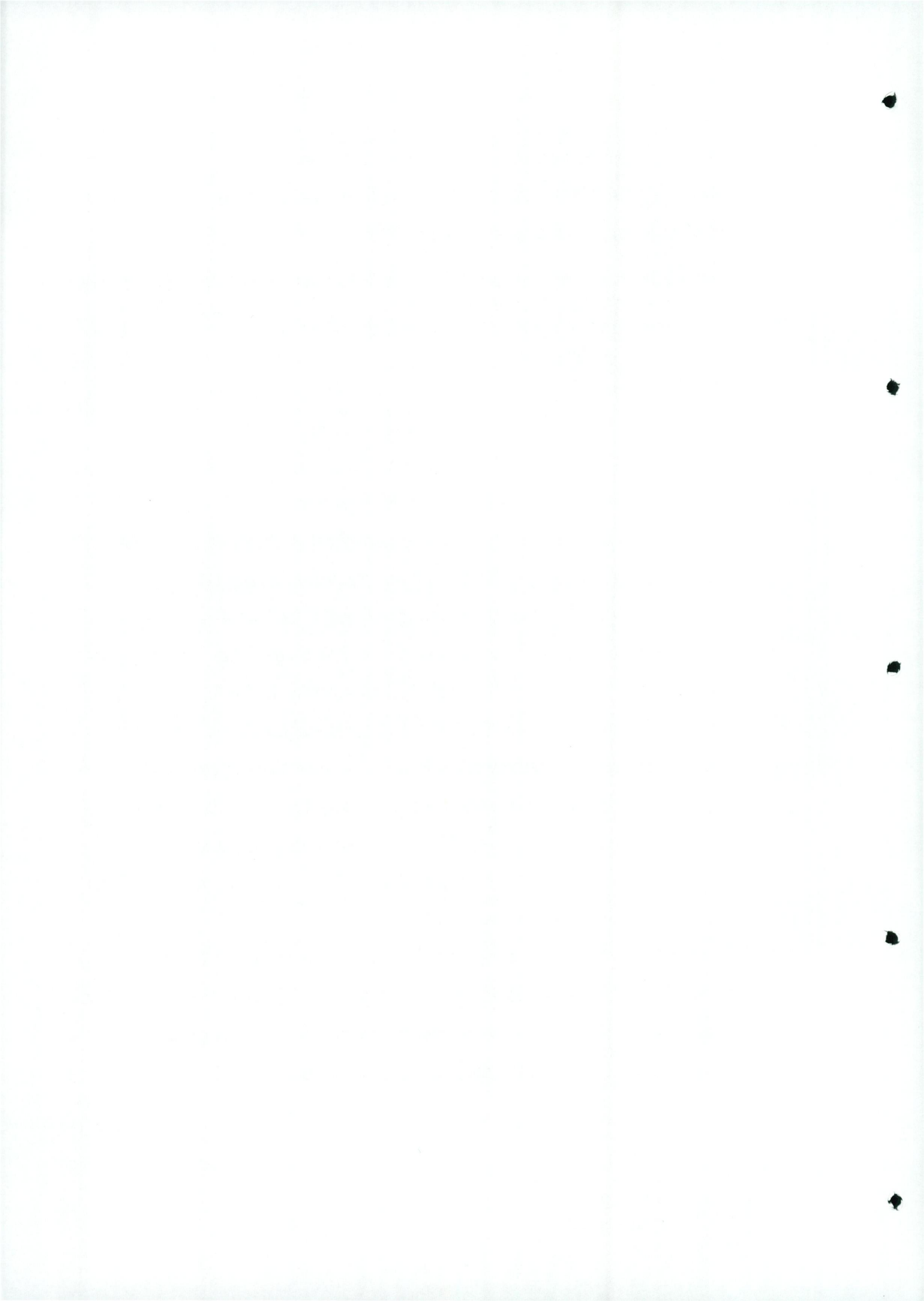
Dismembered body parts feature in a number of Kahlo's paintings: "Henry Ford Hospital" 1932 shows a pelvis, a symbol of relevance to childbirth, "My Grandparents, my parents and I" 1936 shows a foetus connected to her mothers dress by a red artery, "Memory of the Heart" 1937 shows a heart lying on the ground, "Two Fridas" 1939 shows exposed hearts external to the body, "Self Portrait dedicated to Dr. Eloesser" 1940 shows her earring as a hand and a dismembered hand holds a banner, "Self Portrait with the Portrait of Doctor Farill" 1951 shows her palette as a heart.

To what degree was Kahlo aware of the meaning of her symbols? To what degree did she display an awareness of Freudian interpretation? She had some familiarity with the works of Freud. Her work "Moses," painted in 1945, was inspired by Freud's book "Moses the Man and Monotheistic Religion."

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<sup>13</sup>Freud, Sigmund On Sexuality p376

<sup>14</sup>Fer, Briony On Abstract Art, 1997:90



## Ch. 2 Influences on Kahlo's work

### Father

Kahlo was introduced to art by her father, a portrait photographer, through painting excursions and in touching up photographs. Many of her self-portraits are like photographic poses. As poses they reflect not only her external likeness but also act as snap-shots of her thoughts and feelings through the addition of symbols.

"When she was old enough, her father shared with her his interest in archaeology and art and taught her to use a camera and to develop, retouch and colour photographs. . . . The stiff formality of her father's portraits affected her approach to portraiture. Acknowledging the link between his art and her own, Kahlo once said that her paintings were like the photographs that her father did for calendar illustrations, only instead of painting outer reality, she painted the calendars that were inside her head."<sup>15</sup>

Her early work reflected 19th Century Mexican portraiture with its European influences. Her "Self-portrait in a Velvet Dress" 1926, and "Portrait of Alicia Galant" 1927 with "gloomy art nouveau background"<sup>16</sup>, are examples of this style. This style differed greatly from her use of background to depict emotion and meaning in her later works.

Kahlo idolised her father. At the bottom of her "Portrait of my father" 1951 she wrote the following dedication:

"I painted my father Wilhelm Kahlo, of Hungarian-German origin, artist-photographer by profession, in character generous, intelligent and fine, valiant because he suffered for sixty years with epilepsy, but never gave up working and fought against Hitler, with adoration, His daughter Kahlo."<sup>17</sup>

### Suffering

Painting gave Kahlo a source of personal expression, a way of dealing with an otherwise unbearable reality. She gave her suffering form by putting images on it. These images, in turn, externalised this suffering. To find symbols by which we

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<sup>15</sup>Herrera, p19

<sup>16</sup>Taschen, p14

<sup>17</sup>Taschen p10



imbue meaning on our experience is an existential quest and Kahlo continuously sought images for which language was inadequate. Kahlo painted because she needed to:

"The only thing I know is that I paint because I need to, and I paint always whatever passes through my head, without any other consideration."<sup>18</sup>

Kahlo presented the subjective meaning of her work when she applied for the 1940 Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship:

"For twelve years my work consisted of eliminating everything that did not come from the internal lyrical motives that impelled me to paint. Since my subjects have always been my sensations, my states of mind and profound reactions that life has been producing in me, I have frequently objectified all this in figures of myself, which were the most sincere and real thing that I could do in order to express what I felt inside and outside of myself."<sup>19</sup>

## Rivera

Kahlo's adoration of her father was echoed in her relationship with Rivera. A core element of her identity throughout her life was his presence or absence. The following, from her diaries, reflects her obsessive love for Rivera:

Rivera. beginning  
Rivera. constructor  
Rivera. my child  
Rivera. my bridegroom  
Rivera. painter  
Rivera. my lover  
Rivera. 'my husband'  
Rivera. my friend  
Rivera. my father  
Rivera. my mother  
Rivera. my son  
Rivera. I  
Rivera. universe  
diversity in unity  
Why do I call him My Rivera? He never was nor ever will be mine. He belongs to himself."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Kahlo quoted from Vogue in Lowe, p 64

<sup>19</sup>Lowe, p. 64

<sup>20</sup>From Kahlo's diary quoted in Taschen, p 76



She depicts Rivera in a number of her paintings. "Frida and Diego" 1931 depicts a wedding photograph with Kahlo's petiteness exaggerated beside the corpulence of Rivera. He is the painter in this work, holding a palette and brushes. "Portrait of Rivera" 1937 is a simple likeness of Rivera against a blue background, without additional symbolism, perhaps attempting to capture a man now unfaithful in his love for her. Rivera is also depicted on the locket held in the hand of the Mexican Kahlo in "The Two Fridas" 1939 that connects the two hearts of the two Fridas by a red artery.

"Self-portrait as a Tehuana" 1943 depicts Rivera on her forehead. Her head dress comes from a region in Southwest Mexico which had a matriarchal tradition. The painting reflects not only her obsession with Rivera but also her inner matriarchal strength following years of pain and sorrow. "Rivera and Kahlo 1929-1944" 1944 depicts Kahlo and Rivera as two halves of one face. As two halves of one being this double portrait for Rivera's birthday depicts the sun and moon, the scallop and snail. Rivera is painted as a baby with the forehead eye of wisdom in "Moses" or "Nucleus of Creation" 1945. She depicted Rivera, again with the eye in his forehead, as a baby in her hands, both held in a landscape of cacti which is held by the earth goddess in "The love embrace of the universe, the earth (Mexico), myself, Rivera and Señor Xólotl" 1949. Rivera had previously depicted Kahlo as his mother and he as a boy in "Sunday Afternoon Dream in Alameda Park" 1947.

"Rivera and I" 1949, painted when he was once again having an affair with another woman, depicts Rivera on her forehead with the eye of wisdom on Rivera's forehead. In Asia the centre of the forehead is believed to be "the third eye of wisdom".<sup>21</sup> This painting does not try to deprecate Rivera for the misery he caused Kahlo, misery evident in her unbraided hair, but instead idolises him.

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<sup>21</sup>Billeter, Erika World of Frida Kahlo p 22





## Ch. 3 Eleven Works of Kahlo

### "Henry Ford Hospital" 1932

In the painting "Henry Ford Hospital" Kahlo depicted her experience of the loss of her second baby. She had already lost one child. Kahlo shows herself with tears coming from her eyes and yet her face holds no emotion. She is alone, lying on a heavily blood stained sheet on a metal bed in the centre of the painting. Her stomach is still swollen from the pregnancy. Held in her left hand are three arteries reminiscent of the umbilical cord. These arteries connect three symbols over the bed to three symbols under the bed. The central symbol over the bed is a male foetus symbolising the absent baby. On the left is an imaginary model of a woman's torso, and on the right is a snail. Centrally under the bed is an iris, which was a gift from Rivera to Kahlo while in hospital. To the left is an autoclave for sterilising surgical instruments. On the right is the pelvic bone.

Emotion is expressed through the bleakness of the landscape. In the background we see the Detroit skyline, where the event took place, with its industrial building on a vast plain. The figure on the bed looks extremely vulnerable, alone, isolated and without walls for protection.

"The impression of forlornness is reinforced by the desolate industrial landscape on the horizon, against which the bed appears to float."<sup>22</sup>

In this dreamlike painting, the bed dominates as it did in her experience of this event. The enlarged bed reflects the powerful emotions of the event. This reminds me of Massaccio's expulsion from the Garden of Eden in which he used elongated arms to empower the sorrow of Eve. Kahlo sought to imbue meaning on the pain of her miscarriage through distorting the proportions of the bed and through the bleak Detroit horizon line. To achieve this, she named the symbols that were important to her in this event, a therapeutic exercise. She named these symbols, not by word, but by picture. By naming them, she gained power over them. By painting them she put

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<sup>22</sup>Taschen, 1999:37





"Henry Ford Hospital" 1932



the event outside of herself. By juxtaposing the inner landscape of emotion with the outer landscape of reality she conveyed the 'realism' and 'surrealism' of her experience.

### **"My Birth" 1932**

"My Birth" was painted at the time of the death of Kahlo's mother. She had returned from Detroit to Mexico to be with her dying Mother. After her mother's funeral she returned to Rivera in Detroit, he described her as "spent with grief"<sup>23</sup> having watched her mother die.

"My Birth" is an incredible image of childbirth, a radical painting subject at that time. The bed in the painting was her mother's bed where she and her sister Cristina were both born. The painting shows us the artist's view of how she imagined she was born.<sup>24</sup> It followed the theme of birth and death previously represented in "The Henry Ford Hospital" painted shortly before.

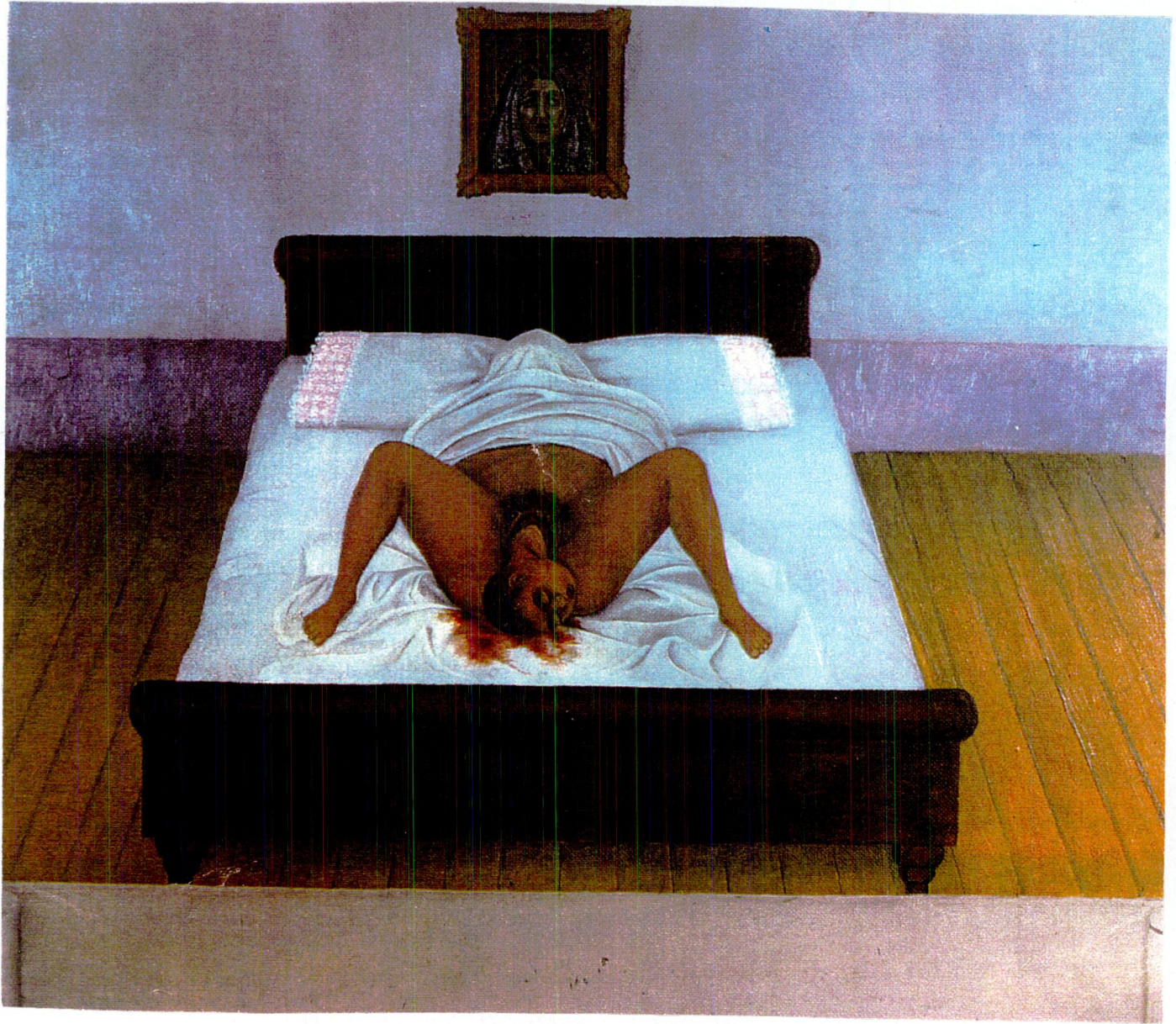
The infant's large head is emerging from between the mother's spread legs. The child is Kahlo with typically heavy eyebrows that meet at the centre. There is a pool of blood where the child's head hangs down on the sheet. The head of the mother is covered by a cloth. This may be a reference to the death of her mother while she was working on the picture. It may also refer to the emotional unavailability of her mother and the fact that Kahlo appeared to have a poor bonding with her mother. Above the bed on the wall is a painting of the Virgin of Sorrows, bleeding and weeping, pierced by swords. The Virgin of Sorrows embodies the sorrow of both women, mother and daughter. Her mother witnessed her first lover's suicide. After Kahlo's birth she became ill and at the same time the family lost the source of their wealth with the fall of the government. Her mother remained in poor health throughout her life. As a result, Kahlo had a wet nurse, which she depicted in the painting "My nurse and I" a painting which shows her receiving milk from a masked native woman, but without eye contact or affection.

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<sup>23</sup>Rivera quoted in Herrera 1983:157

<sup>24</sup>Frida quoted in Herrera 1983:157





"My Birth" 1932

11A





Herrera quoted Kahlo as saying that the Virgin of Sorrows was present as part of her memory rather than for symbolic purposes.<sup>25</sup> It was remembered from her Roman Catholic childhood. Her mother was very religious.

"My mother was hysterical about religion. We had to pray before meals."<sup>26</sup> However the image is more than incidental furniture in this painting. In such a context it reflects the pain and vulnerability of womanhood and childbirth. While this painting is realist in its images, the 'dead mother', giving birth is surrealist, depicting meaning that is rooted in the unconscious of Kahlo, like a bad dream.

### **"My Dress Hangs There" or "New York" 1933**

This is the only collage in the complete works of Kahlo. Depicting American Capitalism, it is filled with symbols of modern American industrial society. Kahlo grew tired of American society. Rivera, however, remained fascinated by the country and did not want to leave. She began working on this painting in America during this time of disagreement between herself and Rivera. She completed the work later in Mexico.

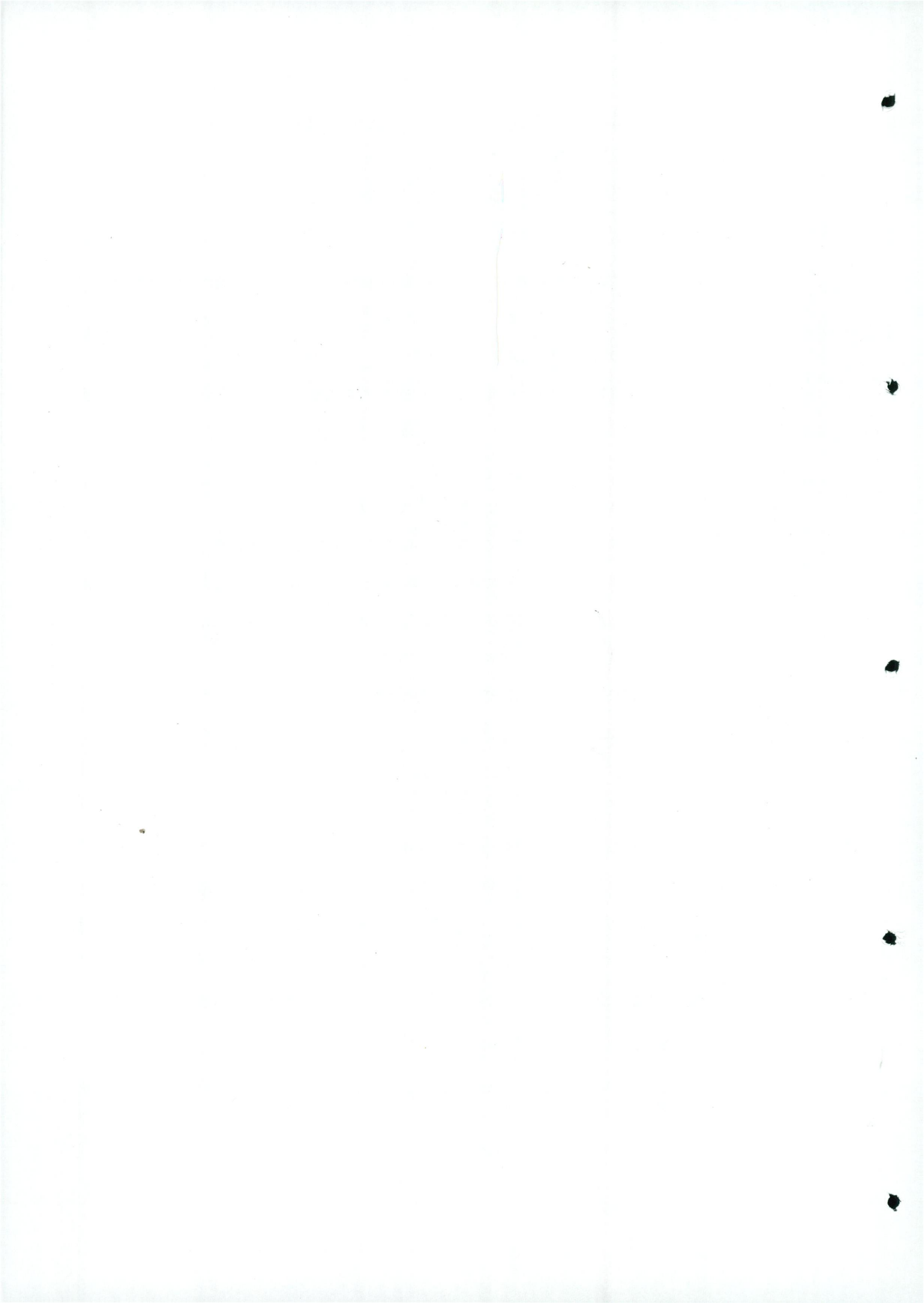
In the middle of the painting hangs Kahlo's Tehuana costume surrounded by sky scrapers. This dress on its hanger is suspended from a blue line or ribbon. By hanging an empty dress she is possibly saying 'I am not here, or don't wish to be here'. There is a lot of emotional power around the symbol of the empty dress. She also used this symbol in other works to show her anguish. The blue line is attached to a toilet seat on a large pedestal, at one end, and to a gold trophy on another pedestal at the other end on the right. This mocks the American obsession with competitiveness and goal orientated preoccupation.

"It is irritating that the most important thing for everyone in Gringolandia is to have ambition, to succeed in becoming somebody and frankly I no longer

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<sup>25</sup>Frida quoted by Herrera 1983:157

<sup>26</sup>Herrera p12





"My Dress Hangs There " or "New York" 1933

12A



have even the least ambition to be anybody. I despise the conceit and being the gran caca does not interest me in any way."<sup>27</sup>

She scorns big business, the church, Wall Street and Federal Hall in "New York". Instead of steps leading up to Federal Hall she has glued a graph showing 'Weekly sales in Millions'. Three big businesses are presented like a wall. A black telephone sits on the top of a skyscraper. Its wire runs in and out of the various buildings and connects them all together. Queues of people line the bottom of the painting reminiscent of capitalism's failure during the great depression. Under the dress are queues of soldiers from the First World War.

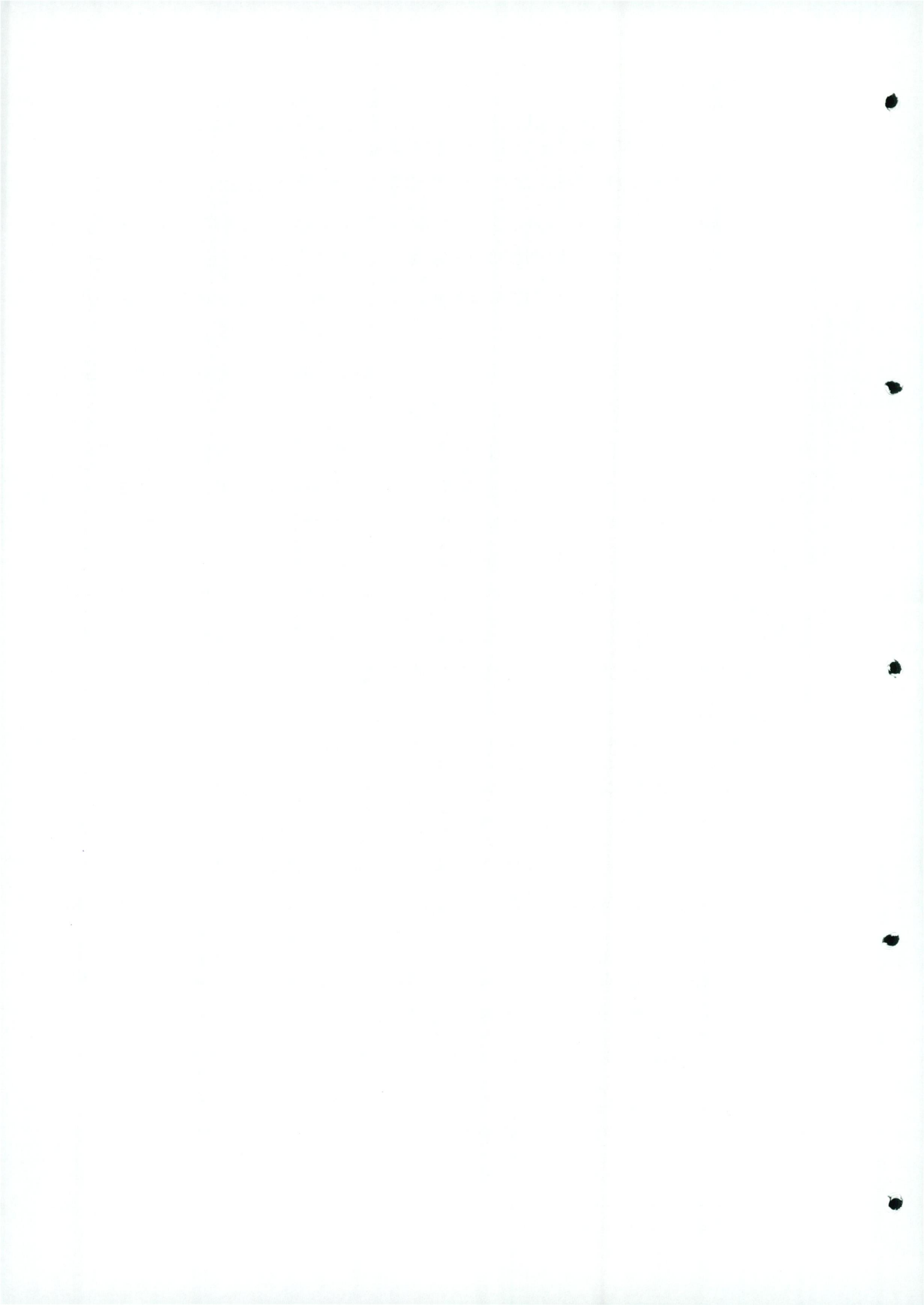
On the right of the painting a garbage can overflows with waste; hot water bottle, daisies, bottles, a toy, a blood stained cloth, entrails, something that looks like a human heart and a bloody human hand. The film star Mae West is on a large billboard next to the church which has a dollar sign on its window. A film star represents vanity, glamour and illusion. Underneath the billboard there is a massive fire raging. In the background is the Statue of Liberty. There is also a large steamship coming into the Harbour symbolising immigration in a country built by immigrants.

Kahlo is presenting a conflict in this collage. Rivera, who idealised Mexican culture and communism, is also enamoured by the money he can make in America. But her meaning frame of images, drawn from Mexican Indian culture, did not rest easy in an impersonal New York in 1933. She distrusted the 'American dream' and idealised communism ("Marxism will give health to the sick" 1954 "Frida with Stalin" 1954).

The political statement in "My Dress" makes it realist. Its humour, by paralleling a toilet bowl with a trophy heighten both the statement and its realism. But the arrangement of images by use of collage is surreal. Collage, a frequent technique of surrealist artists, forces a sense of unity on elements that are not coherent in geographic place or visual perspective and this coherence empowers the disparate images with new meaning, making a political statement of them.

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<sup>27</sup>Frida quoted in Herrera 1983:172



### **"A few little pricks" 1935**

In December 1933 Rivera and Kahlo returned to Mexico. She had yearned for her homeland and was ready to begin work. Her health forced her back into hospital and yet another pregnancy had to be terminated. In 1935 she produced "A few little pricks". It represents the visual transcript of a newspaper report about a woman murdered in an act of jealousy. The murderer stabbed his girlfriend to death. He defended his actions before the judge with the words 'but is was only a few little pricks'.

This is a gruesome painting depicting the killer, the victim and the murder weapon in the immediate aftermath of the murder. He stands over the dead victim who is lying naked on the bed. Her body is covered with bloody knife wounds. There is blood on the bed, on the knife, on the shirt of the killer and on the floor. The blood even extends out onto the frame of the picture. These splashes of blood emerging onto the frame engage the viewer converting the two dimensional painting into three dimensions made by a trail of blood. The painting portrays the total powerlessness of the victim, of the hunter and the hunted.

At the top of the painting are two birds, one black, the other white, depicting the duality of life and death echoed in many of her paintings. They hold in their beaks the name of the painting in Spanish. The bed is the only piece of furniture.

Kahlo explained the casual stance of the murderer in the painting to a friend by saying that it was "because in Mexico killing is quite satisfactory and natural".<sup>28</sup> She added that she had needed to paint this scene because she felt a sympathy with the murdered woman since she herself "had come close to being murdered by life"<sup>29</sup>.

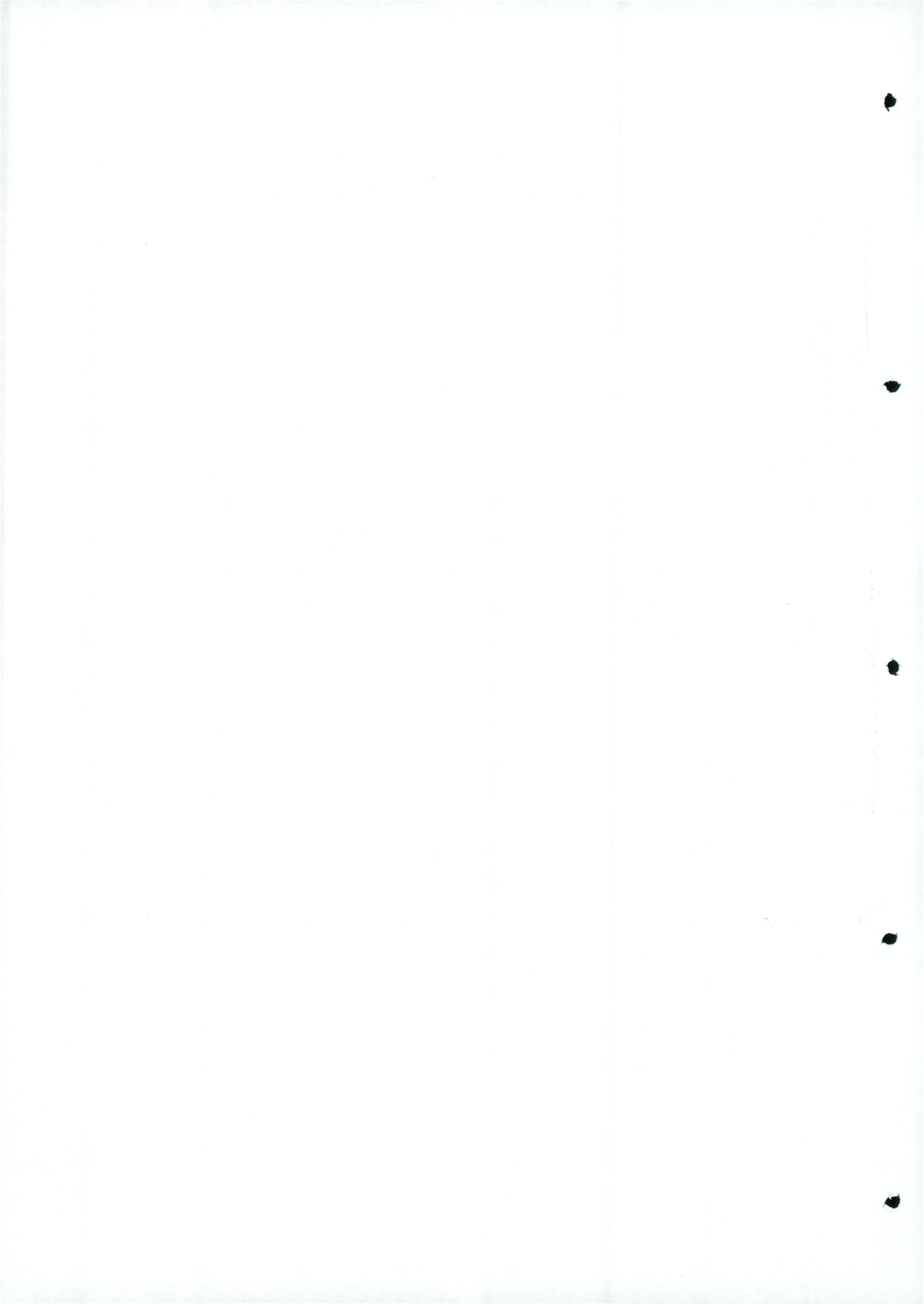
She identified with the murdered woman, the victim, the feelings of being vulnerable and naked. She was conscious of her motives for painting this picture. She consciously chose a murdered woman to depict her self and how she felt she was being treated by life. At the time of this painting Rivera had embarked upon a

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<sup>28</sup>Frida quoted by Herrera 1983:181

<sup>29</sup>Frida quoted in Herrera 1983:181







"A few little pricks" 1935.

14A



love affair with Kahlo's younger sister Cristina. The depiction of a mutilated body has a powerful impact on the viewer. Kahlo made such imagery her trademark. The casual stance of the man reflects the attitude of the murderer in court. It may also reflect Rivera's attitude to abandoning Kahlo. The blood on the frame breaks with the traditionally sharp separation between frame and picture, and breaks the boundary of the painting, carrying it into the world of the viewer. This heightens the impact of the painting. Kahlo is using the brutal murder as an allegory for her inner woundedness, her feminine vulnerability, her powerlessness. All the dead woman's power has been taken by this emotionless man. This is a statement about the vulnerability of woman's sexual identity in relation to man. This psychological component gives the painting a surreal feeling.

### **"Memory of the Heart" 1937**

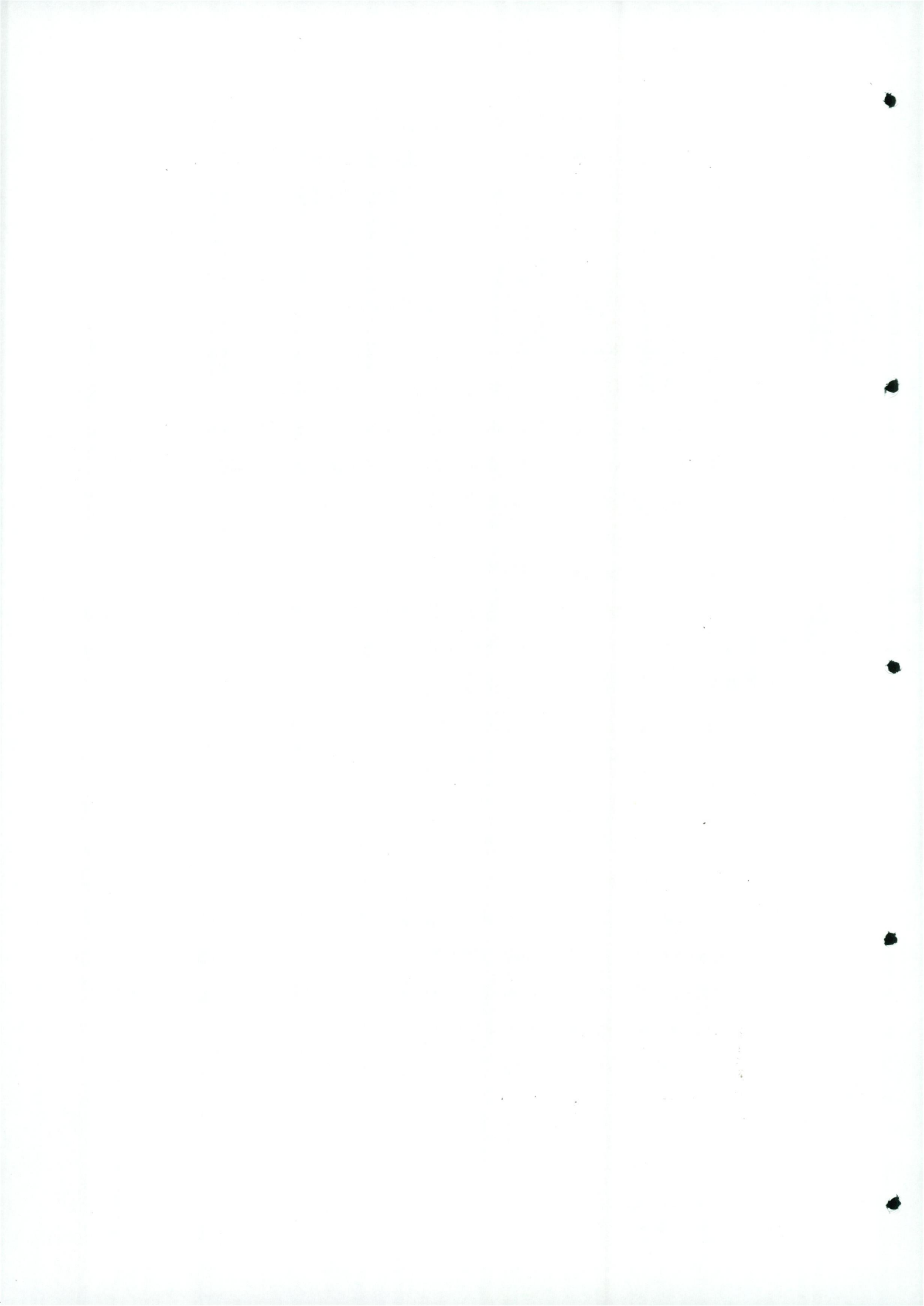
In the "Memory of the Heart" Kahlo depicts herself with her hair tightly cropped at the centre of the painting. Her broken heart lies at her feet disproportionately larger than the central figure. This painting depicts her ongoing heartbreak at Rivera's affair with her sister. There is a hole in her chest where her heart should be. The hole is pierced by a wooden spear. A small cherub sits on the heavier end of the spear and a smaller cherub sits on the lighter end as if they are playing see-saw. This may represent black humour at her own plight.

There are tears streaming down her face. But, as in all her self portraits, the face is emotionless. Her right foot is on the ground and the other foot in the ocean. Her right foot wears a normal shoe. On her left foot, the foot that suffered in the accident, is a shoe in the shape of a sailing boat. She is without arms or hands possibly signifying her sense of helplessness in the face of Rivera's unfaithfulness. Her abandonment was explained in Rivera's autobiography:

"If I loved a woman the more I loved her the more I wanted to hurt her. Frida was most obviously a victim of this disgusting trait."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Rivera in Herrera 1983:183





"Memory of the Heart" 1937

15A



This painting is about the pain of loving, the brokenness of her heart, a physical as well as an emotional pain. Physical wounds are symbols for emotional or psychological wounds.

This painting is also an example of duality, so evident throughout her work. In the painting she is linked with the Tehuana dress which hangs over the uncertain ocean while the arm from the modern dress is adrift, not connected to her. This duality represents a departure from the world of the heart to the world of dreams, of images whose origins are found in the ancient culture from which the Tehuana dress is derived. Her identity and her heart have been defined by her relationship to Rivera. She is leaving this heartland and setting out on an exploration of her own identity, including her sexuality. Her cropped hair, also in her "Self-portrait with Cropped Hair", 1940, in which she depicts herself with male sexuality, wearing a man's suit while her beautiful tresses fall around her, is possibly an expression of her bisexuality. Her identity is so bound in relationship to men, namely her father and Rivera, that she wants to liberate herself from the feminine and seek an identity beyond these restrictions.

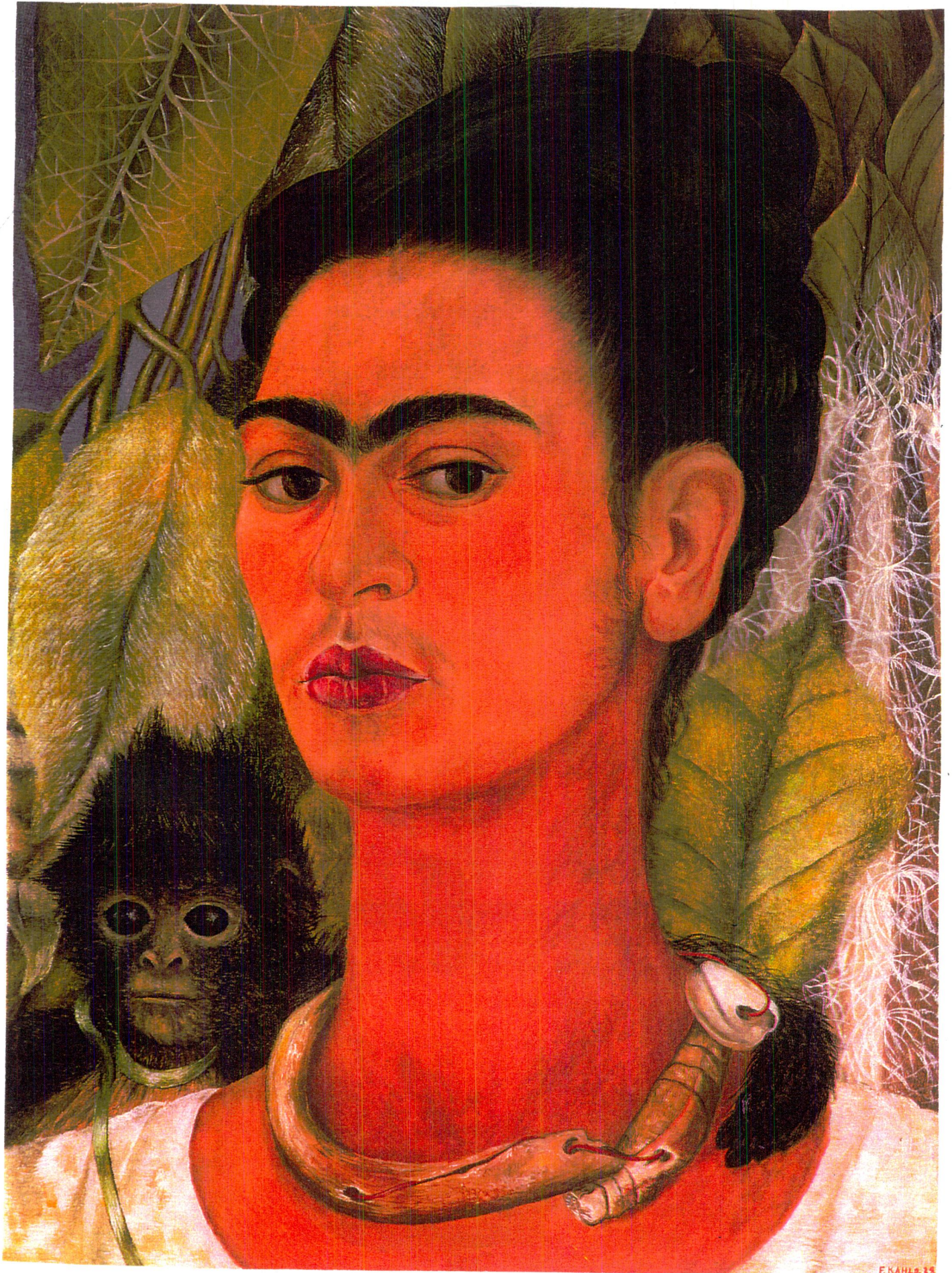
### **"Self Portrait with Monkey" 1938**

In Mexican mythology the monkey is the patron of the dance, and is also a symbol of lust and promiscuity. In the background we see leaves, plants and cacti of Mexico. Kahlo looks very sophisticated in this painting. Her neck is long, the mouth is rosy red and slightly pouted. Her hair is in a braid on the top of her head and there is a green tone mixed in with the darker colour of her hair. She is wearing a bone necklace. Around her neck is the arm of the monkey, its hand resting lightly on her shoulder. Around the monkey's neck is a green ribbon. The monkey is her companion and friend. Its eyes are soulful and tender.

A red artery or ribbon holds the necklace together at the point at which the curved bone is broken. The strands of the cactus are entwined and placed at the back of her hand. They seem to float in the air. Her dark hair is a sharp contrast to the whiteness of the cacti hair. The vine leaves look as if they have a fine hair on them too, and







"Self Portrait with Monkey" 1938

16A



she paints the veins on the leaves as if translucent. The sky is almost completely covered by vegetation except for a small patch of grey blue on the left. The colour of the vegetation is an autumnal yellow green. The only bright colour is on her lips and the string or artery which holds the bone necklace together.

This is a haunting and beautiful piece of work. There is a visual similarity between Kahlo's head, the monkey's head and the foliage in the background in their apparent softness and caressability. Here we see an image of an independent woman reinforced by her expression. There is no emotion shown in the face. In fact she looks feminine but defiant. She reinforces this image by wearing the bone necklace possibly pre Columbian. The symbols in this painting are identifiable, but what is the meaning of the painting and its images? The monkey as a symbol of lust provides a possible clue to the work. Kahlo is expressing her own sexual impulse in the midst of fertile and lush growth. She is free from Rivera to express a sexuality/sensuality which hitherto she had saved only for him. The painting expresses an independence and strength that has overcome the hurt expressed so vividly in "A few little pricks" and "Memory" while the broken bone depicts the memory of that pain

#### **"What the water gave me" 1938**

"What the water gave me" was the painting that Andre Breton used to illustrate his Essay on Kahlo, in his book Surrealism and Painting.

Levy provides us with Kahlo's description of this painting:

"It's quite explicit. It is an image of passing time. She indicated, for one thing that was about time and childhood games and the sadness of what had happened to her in the course of her life. Dreams, as Kahlo grew older, were all of them sad. The child's dreams were happy. As a child she played with toys in the bathtub. She had dreams about them. The painting's images relate to her bathtub games. And now she looks at herself in the bathtub, and, as with backward dreaming, all her dreams have turned to a sad ending. She also used to talk a lot about masturbating in the bathtub. And then, she talked about the perspective that is shown in this painting. Philosophically her idea is about the image of yourself that you have because you do not see





"What the water gave me" 1938



your own head. The head is something that is looking, but not seen. It is what one carries around to look at life with."<sup>31</sup>

Lowe describes "What the Water Gave me" as Kahlo's most convincingly Surrealist image:

"Nowhere is Kahlo's imagination more completely uninhibited nor scale less relevant, nowhere does illogic reign more blatantly, nor do the imaginary and the real mingle more vividly than in this image. . . Kahlo presents forms with double meanings: a cluster of black, viney growth mimics pubic hair; the conch symbolizes, as it has traditionally, labia,"<sup>32</sup>

This bizarre statement draws on various other works done by Kahlo. Taschen points out sources for individual elements which are presented as a collage of events from Kahlo's life depicted in previous and later works. The blood dropping from arteries at the overflow is reminiscent of the later "Two Fridas". The skeleton is also found in her "Four inhabitants of Mexico City" 1938. The image of two female nudes with lesbian overtones is also found in "Two nudes in the Forest" 1939 The conch, the symbol for the labia, is also found in the later work "Rivera and Kahlo 1929-1944" 1944. The work also includes influences from other artists, from the bird in Bosch's "The garden of delights", leaves from Ernst' "The Nymph Echo".

It is a surreal fantasy using realist symbols. The viewer is introduced into a non-rational world which is dominated by intuition. As in a lot of her works, the earth features strongly. She reflects back to us, a viewer without a head looking out.

There is a sort of magic about this ritual of not seeing the seer, or the self. A reality as perceived by her unconscious mind that could be called surrealist, beyond the reality of conscious experience.

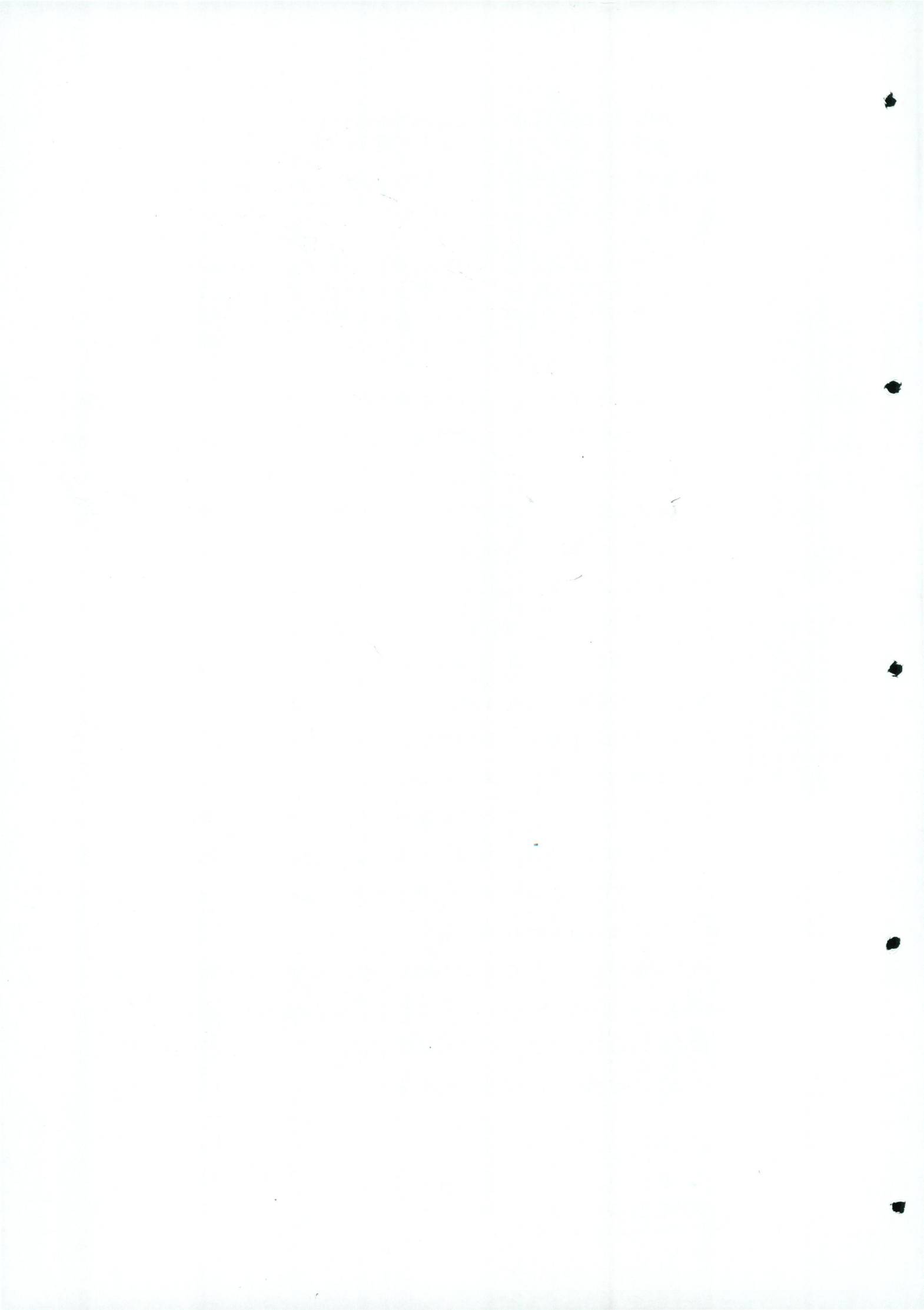
A central figure in "What the water gave me" is her father. It is interesting that Rivera is absent from this work which depicts so many elements of her life. Perhaps the presence of her father in the painting was sufficient to displace Rivera, who, at this time was largely absent from Kahlo's life.

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<sup>31</sup>Julien Levy quoted in Herrera, 1983:259/60

<sup>32</sup>Lowe, Sarah m. Frida Kahlo





## **"Two Fridas" 1939**

Kahlo painted the 'Two Fridas' for the international Surrealist exhibition in Mexico City in 1940. She was working on the painting, her first big picture, when she received news that Rivera was insisting on a divorce. She completed it after the divorce.

There are two full length self portraits in this painting. The Mexican Kahlo dressed in her Tehuana Dress, the Kahlo that Rivera loved, holds a locket sized picture of Rivera. This locket is now in the Kahlo museum in Mexico city. The other Kahlo looks more European, wearing a Victorian dress:

"Kahlo is said to have remarked on the identities of The two Fridas: one was the self that Rivera once loved and the other, the one he no longer loved."<sup>33</sup>

The two Fridas hold hands as if comforting each other. Both the hearts are exposed, showing pain in love. The background is barren, a grey and white turbulent sky. This painting presents a duality of two selves. Both are beautiful in their own right. Rivera has control of both hearts through the artery linking them to his picture. Is the European Kahlo the artist who is searching beyond the boundaries of cultural identity? Is this an unconscious representation of this division by Kahlo? Her heart, her love is strangling her neck. The white virginal gown is blood stained, like the blood stained sheet in "Henry Ford Hospital" after the loss of her baby, symbolising the loss of Rivera. She is using a surgical clamp to control the bleeding. Has she regained control of her feminine beauty? She is strong, her head is dignified. From this point on, she paints in order to earn her own income and no longer accepts any financial aid from Rivera:

"I will never accept money from any man till I die."<sup>34</sup>

This independence is reflected in her dual self representation, a duality expressing her own attempt to reconstruct herself in the wake of Rivera's rejection:

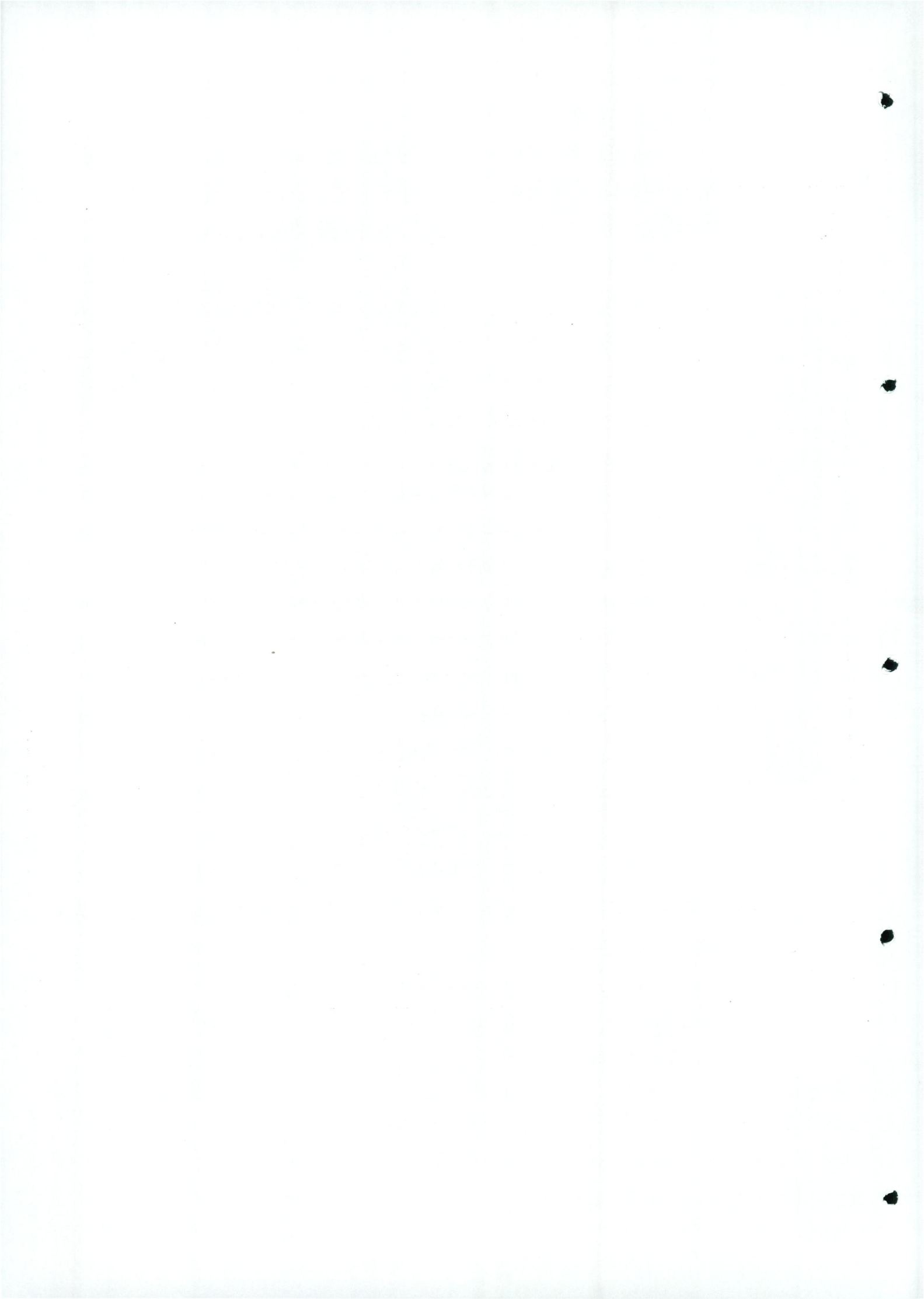
"Kahlo is not merely expressing aspects of her personality but constructing alternative selves, creating her own personae."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Lowe, p 59

<sup>34</sup>Frida quoted in Taschen 1993:52.

<sup>35</sup>Lowe p 59





"Two Fridas" 1939

19A



As a child, Kahlo had an imaginary friend whom she visited by travelling through an imaginary door which she created by blowing a fog on glass and drawing a square in the fog. She found great joy in her imaginary friendship and in two Frida's she again seeks this friendship, an inner transcendent self not bound by harsh reality. In order to re-enter the imaginary world, she needs the surrealist symbols to guide her way.

### **"Self Portrait dedicated to Dr. Eloesser" 1940**

While many of Kahlo's self-portraits show her wearing a necklace, in this painting she wears a crown of thorns around her neck. The thorns are pricking her flesh and are reminiscent of Christ's crown of thorns. The thorns are simultaneously a pre Columbian symbol of resurrection and rebirth and stand for the release of pain. On her ear she wears the earring that Picasso had made for her. Drops of blood drip down her neck. There is no emotion shown in the face. The top of her head is crowned in flowers and buds about to open. Her brown robe looks like a robe that Christ would have worn. It is the same colour as the foliage in the background. There are a mixture of leaves, bare branches and new buds about to open, symbolising death, life and rebirth. At the bottom of the painting a hand shaped brooch holds a ribbon on which she has written:

"I painted my portrait in the year 1940 for Dr Eloesser my doctor and my best friend, with all love Kahlo".

In this painting Kahlo presents herself as a martyr. The thorns are drawing blood. Although her face appears grave and unemotional, the flowers and the new buds give us a sense of hope. Christian imagery is common in popular Mexican art, particularly the theatrically bloody martyrs.

The Aztecs practised human sacrifice and punctured their own skin and ears to draw blood so that crops would flourish. Is Kahlo's blood similarly a source of fertility in the painting? The flowers on her hair symbolise the fertility of her mind contrasted with the thorns of her broken body.

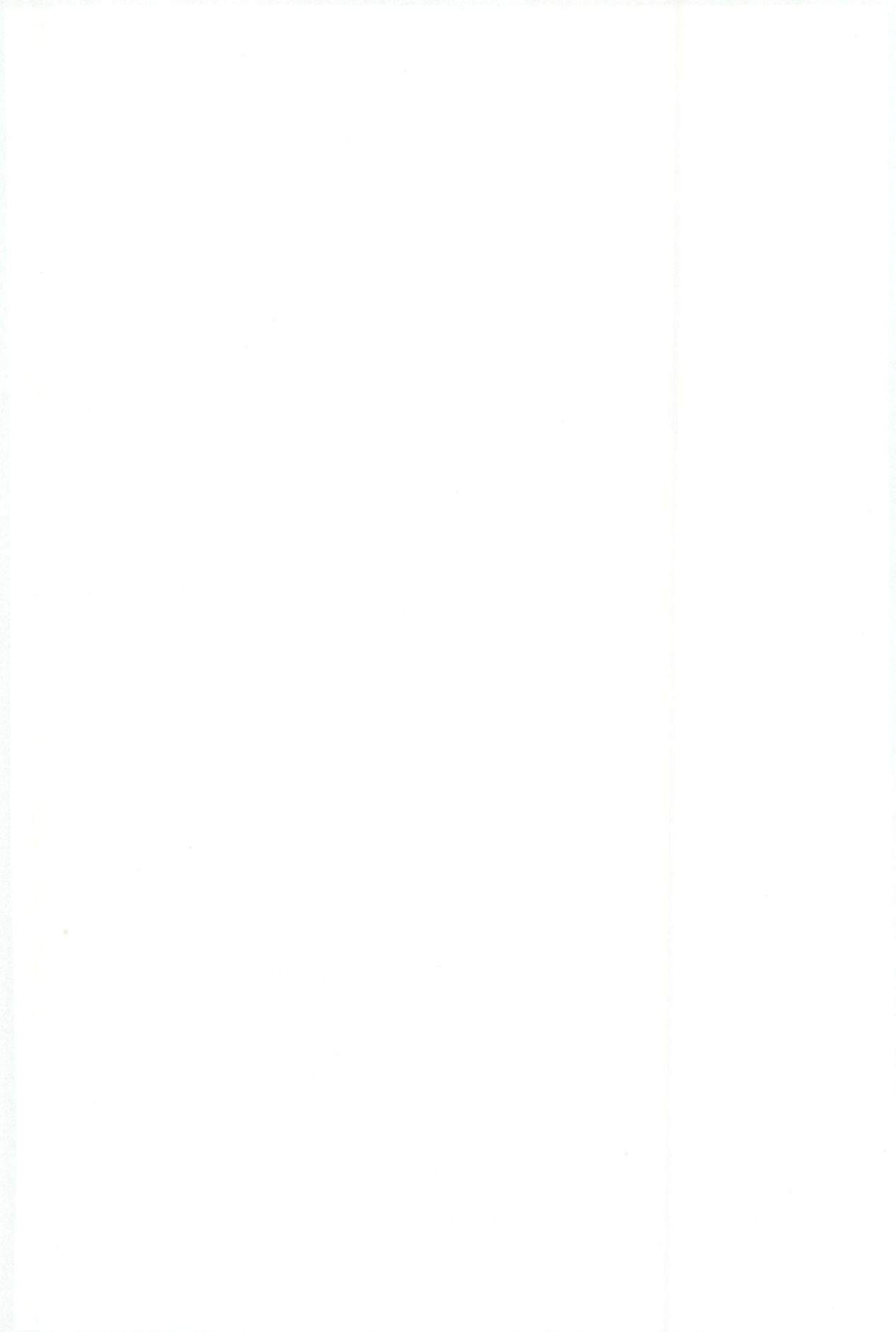




"Self Portrait dedicated to Dr. Eloesser" 1940

20A



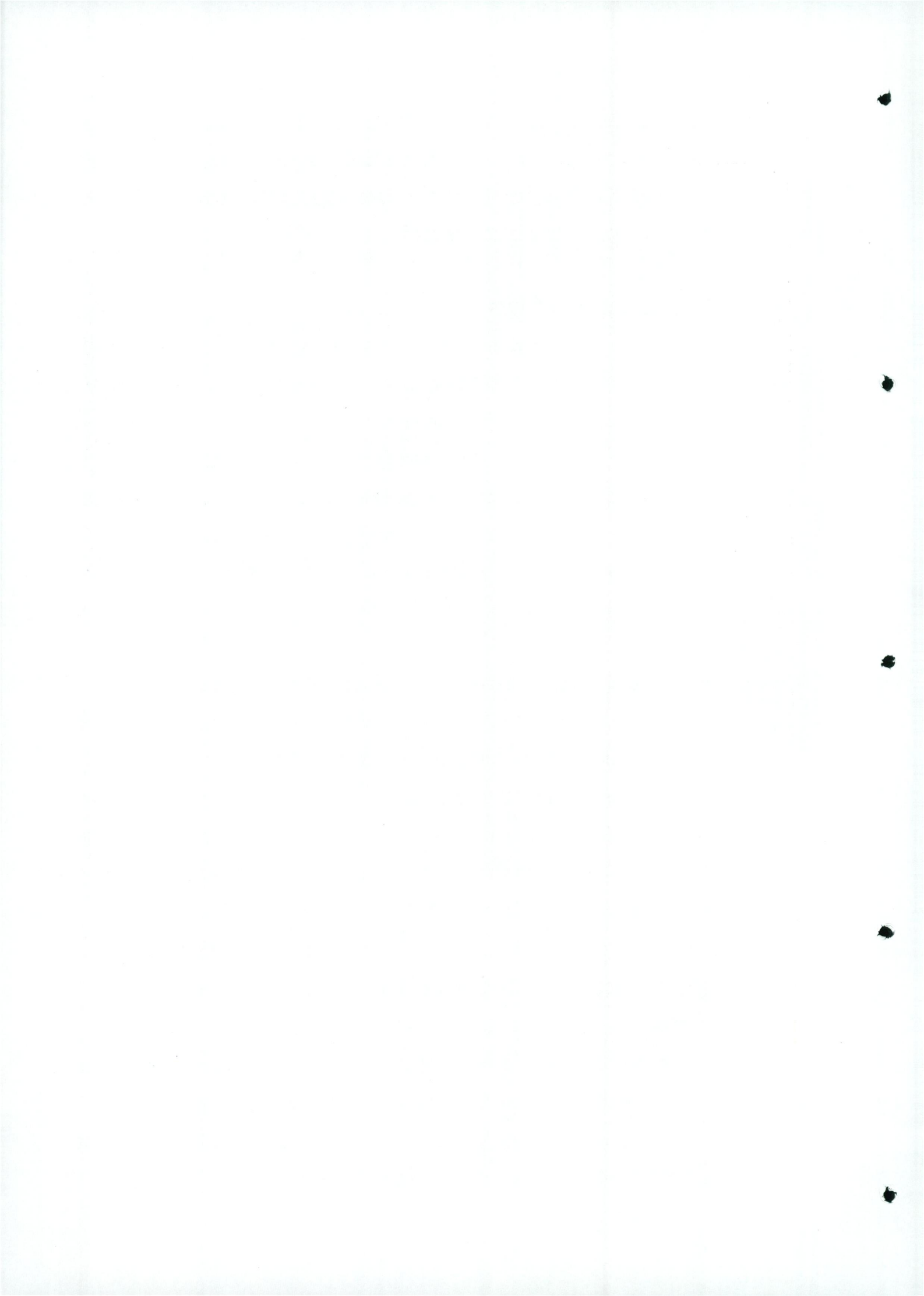


A Christian interpretation provides a different emphasis. In the painting we see her suffering, but not her vulnerability which is hidden behind a mask of control. Has she replaced Christ with herself? To do so is to place herself among the icons of her society. Both endure triumph over suffering.

### **"The Broken Column" 1944**

By 1944 Kahlo's health had deteriorated to the point where she had to wear a steel corset. In "The Broken Column" an iconic column broken in several places stands in place of her spine. The body is opened down the front almost split in half. It is held together by a steel corset which seems to be all that is holding the body upright. The opening in the front of her body is similar to the openings in the earth in the background. The background is a strange, bleak desert landscape. Nails are sticking into her whole body. Nails through the hands and feet are a potent image in Christianity. A sheet wraps her lower torso, another possible reference to Christian iconography.

This painting is a dramatic expression of her pain and suffering. She looks as though she would fall apart without the steel corset which imprisons her body. Her naked breasts are beautifully and perfectly shaped and full compared to the brokenness of the rest of her body. Her hair is loose and tears are flowing down her cheeks. She does not look to heaven for solace but confronts her pain by facing the viewer head on. Her features are unflinching because she conveyed her emotion by the use of symbols and wounds. The broken column has a strong impact on the viewer. The physical torture and masking of pain together make this painting a deeply unsettling picture. The spine has been replaced by a permanent ruin. If "The Broken Column" had been painted by an artist with complete health it would be seen as surreal in portraying pain. But many of the images in the painting, although surreal are explained by Kahlo's damaged spine and the pain it bore her throughout her life. The images within this painting are penetrable because they are realist in their allegorical content. This is also their power.





"The Broken Column" 1944

21A



## **"Tree of Hope, Keep Firm" 1946**

This self portrait was done after an operation to have her spine strengthened.

"So the big operation is behind me . . . I have two huge scars on my back in this shape."<sup>36</sup>

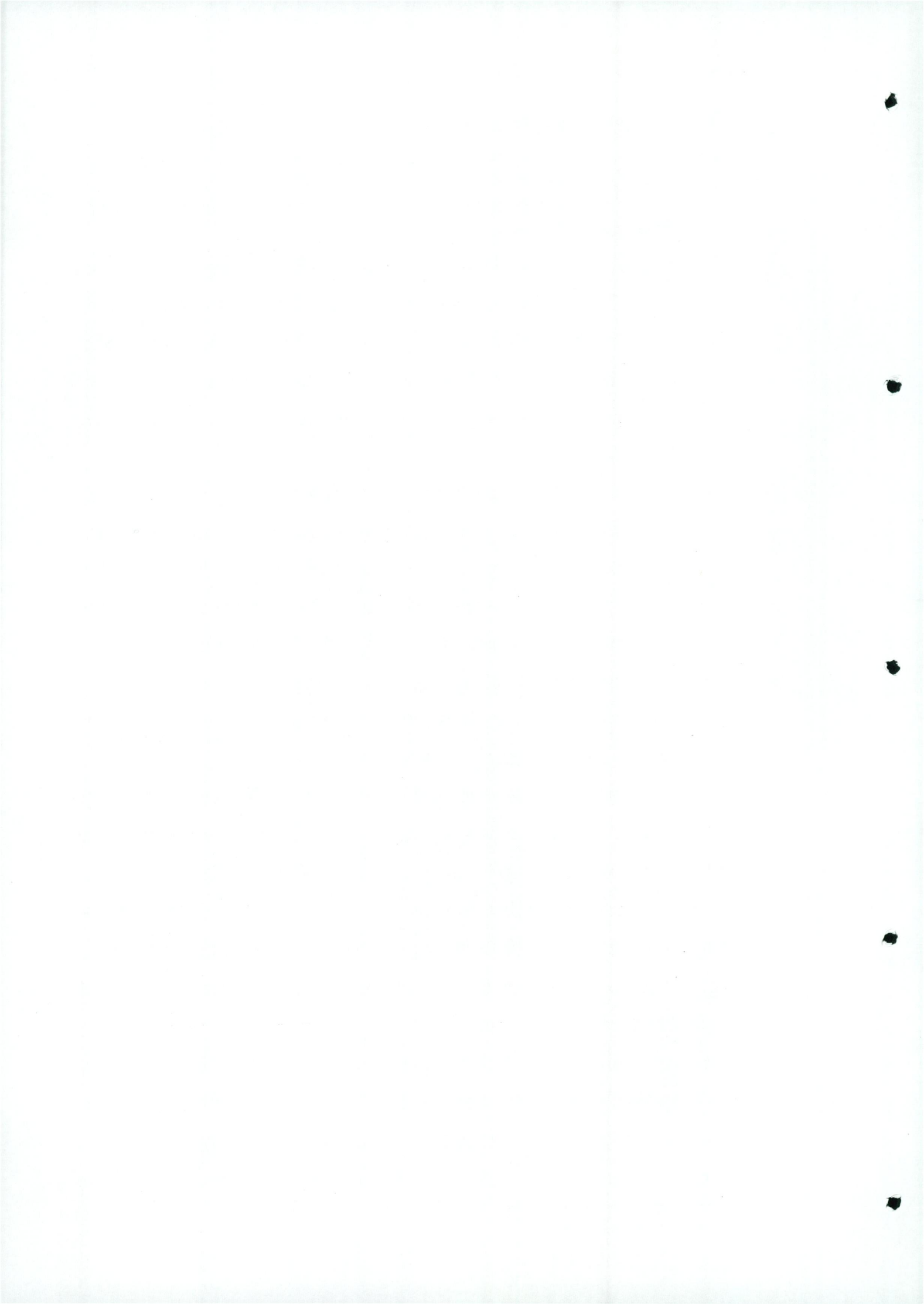
"Tree of Hope" is a double self-portrait. On the left is a vulnerable Kahlo following the operation. The wounds from the incision are open and bloody. She is wrapped in a white sheet. Only her hair and the operated area of her back are exposed. She is lying on the hospital trolley. The background is a burnt desert landscape with a searing sun. The front of her body is facing the sun. Her body looks weakened and violated like the background earth.

The portrait on the right is sitting upright and courageous, gazing out at us. This is a night scene illuminated by the moon. The message she holds written in red on her flag reads "Tree of Hope Keep Firm". The Tehuana strong Kahlo holds a corset on her lap and the shoulders of the dress reveal two buckles resembling corset buckles. The strong Kahlo also needs the support of the corset. The Tehuana Kahlo as companion to the wounded Kahlo makes us aware of her loneliness. Two selves, one watching out for the other. She is both vulnerable and strong at the same time. She has placed herself in a group of images that symbolically play out a cyclical drama of life and death. The background is tired and worn. The sun and moon, light and dark, weak and strong, reflect the Aztec notion of the eternal war between light and dark. In Aztec mythology the sun was fed by sacrificial human blood to appease the white sun god Huitzilopochtli, the personification of day, summer, the south and fire. It's opposite is the black god of the set sun, the personification of night, winter, the north and water. The battle between these two forces ensures that the world remains in equilibrium.

Surrealists were attracted to bizarre and unusual forms in nature. The weak Kahlo lies sleeping on a prehistoric barren landscape. She reveals herself responding to nature. She captures the abstract qualities of this desert bleached by the sun and intense contrast of light and dark, something she shared with other surrealists. Long

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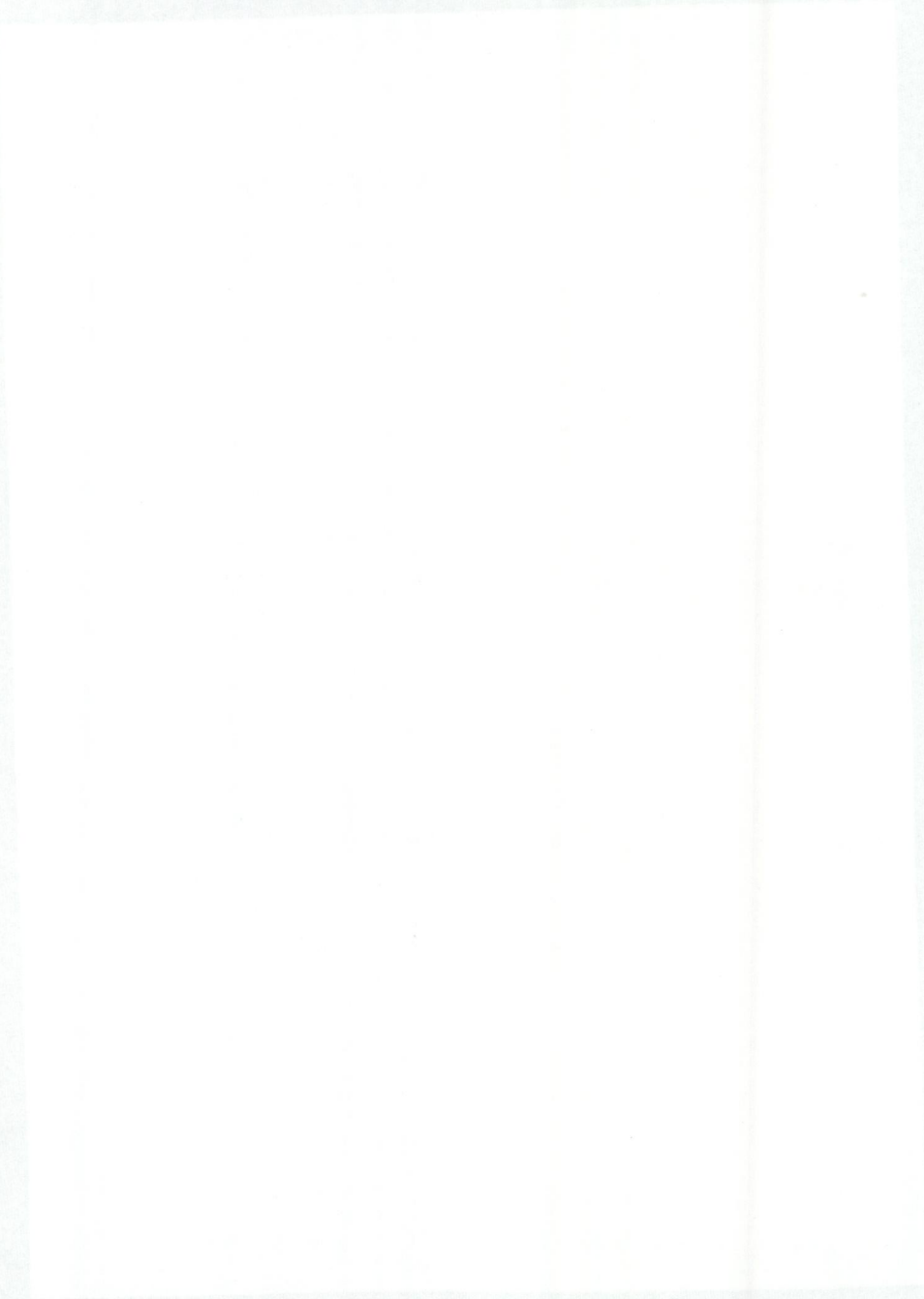
<sup>36</sup>Kahlo quoted in Taschen 1993:68





"Tree of Hope, Keep Firm" 1946  
22A





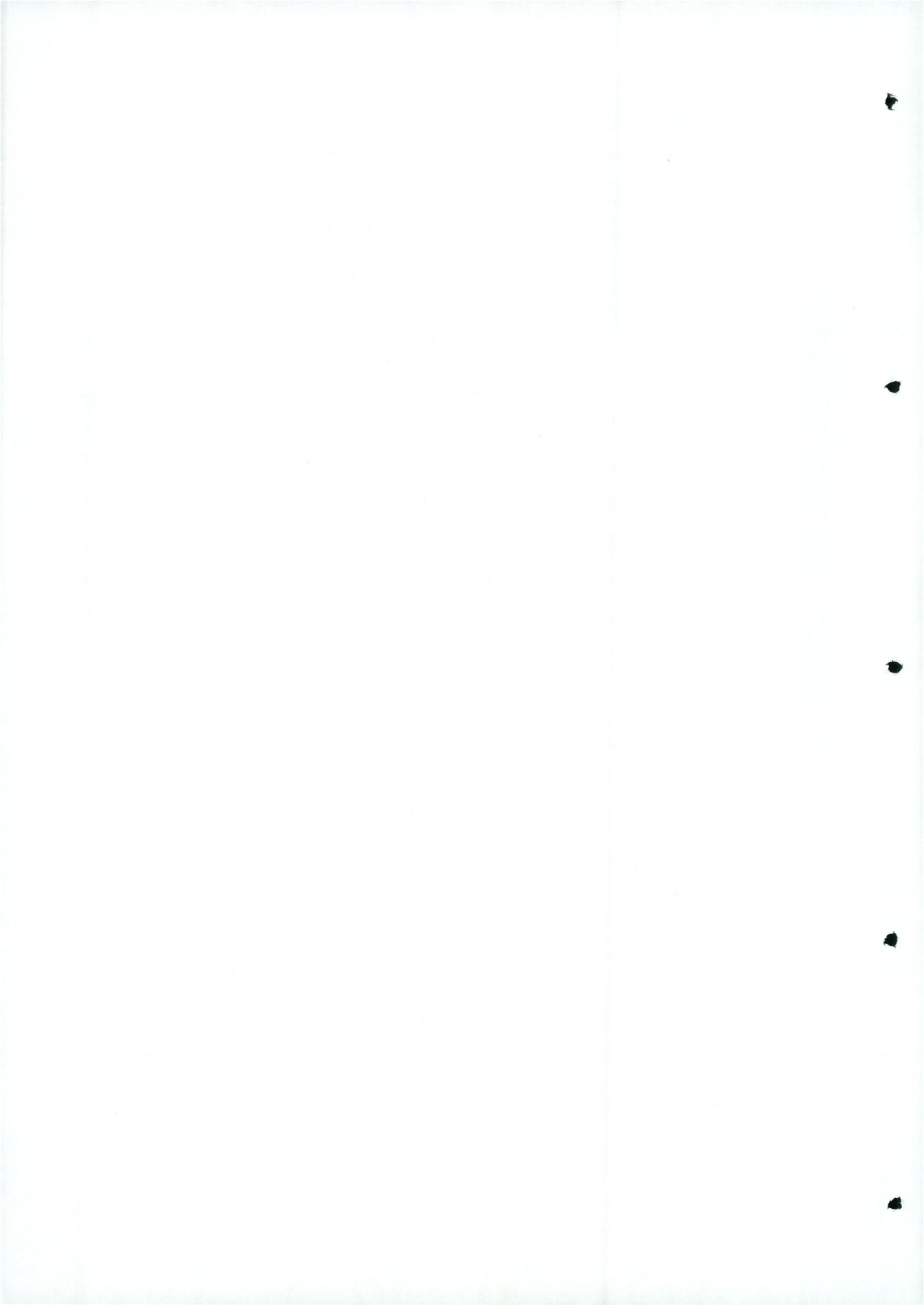
sweeping grounds receding to distant horizons establishing a barren planar ground as a setting for the imagery. The light has an air of emptiness and loneliness. The shrouded figure is almost like a phantom. The figures are more tensely painted than the background. She identified strongly with these barren landscapes. The weak lying Kahlo is viewed from the back and naked at the waist. The strong Kahlo is viewed from the front wearing a dress. The difference reinforces the tension between interior and exterior, the strong and vulnerable, the visible and the veiled.

"Looking inside herself, Kahlo found a barren and pain filled world that she externalised in self portraits in which she inhabits landscapes stripped of foliage, the earth rent with deep dry cracks, the sky stormy and threatening."<sup>37</sup>

She is again playing on the duality theme which is a the core of so many works of art and literature like J. Alfred Prufrock's 'Let us go then, you and I'. Kahlo's you and I is her public and private self. In this painting her public idealised Mexican self is presented with her broken daylight private self. The face of the private self is not revealed to us.

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<sup>37</sup>Chadwick, Whitney 1985:96



## **Conclusion**

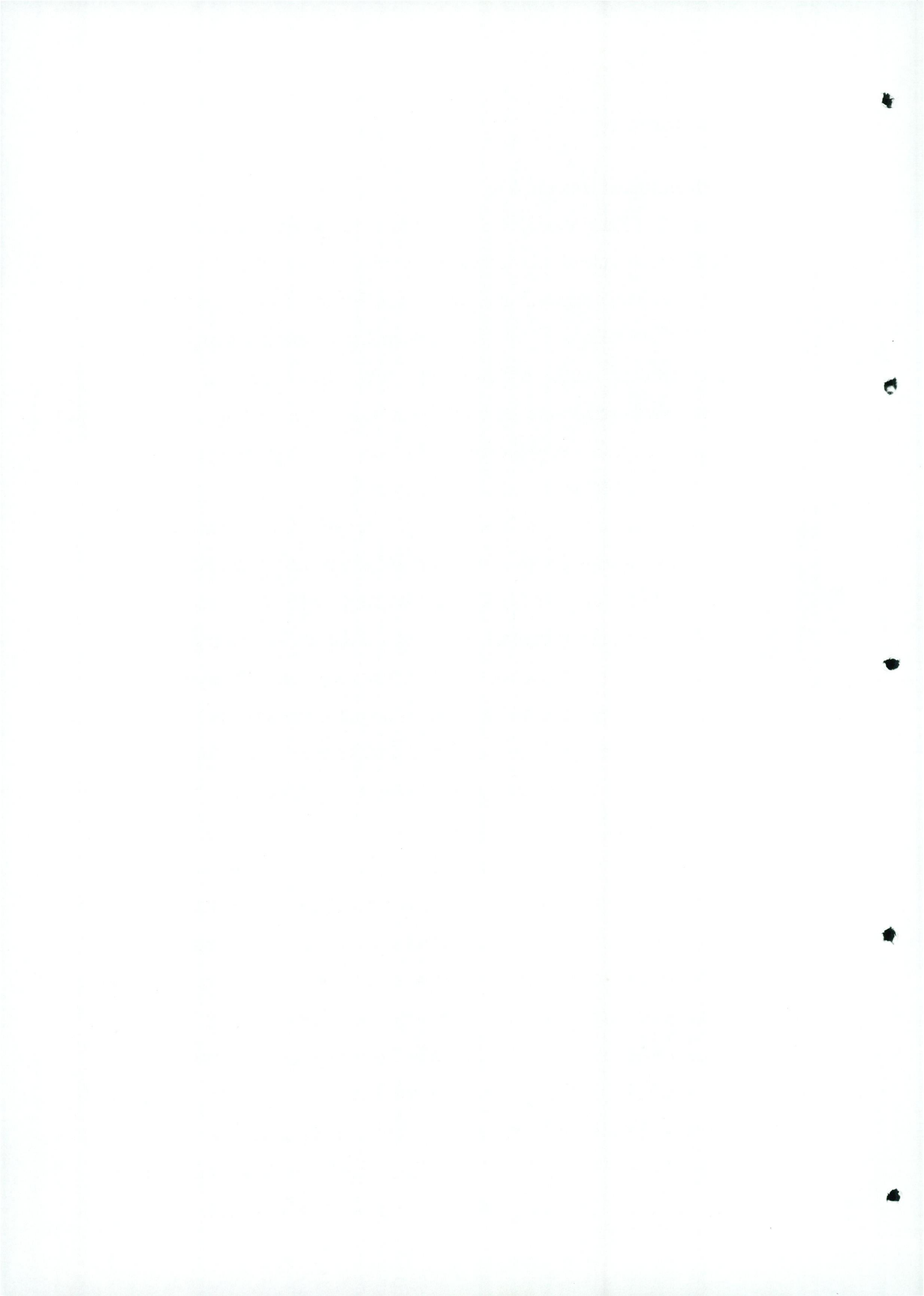
### **Surrealism and Mexican Art**

The work of Kahlo was called Surrealist by contemporary critics and artists from the European tradition. She had much in common with the Surrealist movement. Her works have a surrealist emphasis on pain. Her use of animals and plants to represent emotional or psychic states are familiar to surrealists who painted human limbs sprouting branches and the human figure with an animal head.

Kahlo's need to show what lay inside led her to a kind of painting in which the telling of a personal story dominates. She chose the path of intense personal exploration not unlike that of the surrealist artists.

By examining the work of Kahlo, however, one begins to understand the differences between European art culture and Mexican art culture. Mexico had a long tradition of magic in its art forms. This magic and related rituals were not surrealist in the European sense, but realist in so far as their meanings were held in common by the people. European surrealists promoted privately intuited non-rational images. Mexican art portrayed publicly understood non-rational images. As a result, the meaning of European surrealist art is elusive even to the artist, but much of Kahlo's work remains penetrable to the viewer who takes the time to study the context of her work.

The background to her self portraits in the 30s and 40s expressed her state of mind and physical health. Landscape, more than facial expression, was used to depict her physical and emotional state. The external landscape of her paintings reflected her own internal landscape. Bleak landscapes depicted her sorrow at her miscarriage in "Henry Ford Hospital" 1932 and "My Birth" 1932. Bleak landscapes also depicted her desolation at the betrayal of Rivera in "Memory of the heart" 1937, "Self-portrait with Itzcuintli Dog" 1938, "The two Fridas" 1939 and "Cropped hair" 1940. Similarly, she used bleak landscape to depict physical pain in "The Broken Column" 1944, "Without Hope" 1945, "Landscape" 1946, "Tree of Hope, Keep Firm" 1946 and "The wounded deer" 1946. In "Wounded Deer" 1946, Kahlo



expresses a magical death through the body of a stag, a mythological story. Her transformation from human to animal is interwoven into a magical landscape, a dream world with realist perspectives.

Backgrounds of rich landscape filled with luscious vegetation reflected a stronger Kahlo in a number of her self-portraits of the late thirties and forties, "Self-portrait with monkey" 1938 depicts Kahlo as sensuous and defiant against such a lush background. Brokenness is shown in the broken bone necklace. "Self-portrait dedicated to Dr. Eloesser" 1940 presents similarly luscious growth. The necklace of thorn producing blood from her skin, reminds us of her pain. The femininity rejected in "Cropped hair" re-emerged in "Self-portrait with Braid" 1941, following her remarriage to Rivera. She is surrounded by vines with large leaves, her rich hair is outlandishly braided. Her collar in this portrait is of sculpted bone pieces joined by a red thread. In "Thinking about death" 1943 the background of the painting is filled with leaves on thorny branches, a pre-Hispanic symbol pointing to rebirth following death. She wears no necklace in this painting. The necklace featured in so many of her portraits connected her to Rivera and to life.

"Me and my parrots" 1941, painted during her affair with portrait photographer Nickolas Muray, whose work paralleled that of her father, lacks a background. The absence of foliage may reflect the absence of Rivera from her heart by the replacement of another man, also an artist in his own right. However, the absence was never complete, as Muray's words in a later letter to Kahlo convey"

"Of the three of us there was only two of you, I always felt that. Your tears told me that when you heard his voice."<sup>38</sup>

"Self-portrait with Monkeys" 1943, painted at a time when Kahlo gave painting lessons in the School of Painting and Sculpture, returns to the lush background with the flower of a cactus opening like a flame.

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<sup>38</sup>Taschen p64



## **Existentialism**

Underlying the work of Kahlo was a lifestyle that can best be described as 'existentialist'. 'Existentialism' is a term used in philosophy to describe a state of being which intensely examines the meaning of one's own existence. It insists on the notion that as human beings we are constantly confronted with choices, no matter what our circumstances.

Lowe emphasises the role of her broken body as central to Kahlo's identity. Her existence as a broken body is the reason for her search for meaning:

"Virtually all Kahlo's self-portraits navigate her ego among political, social, and emotional structures: she conceives of herself as Mexican, female, and physically damaged. Her portraits are plastic evidence of her will to contextualize herself - they are testimony to her search for existential meaning in a world of doubt. For Kahlo, neither ego nor personality define her: it is the indisputable existence of her body, transmitted from mirror to canvas, that brings her closest to being."<sup>39</sup>

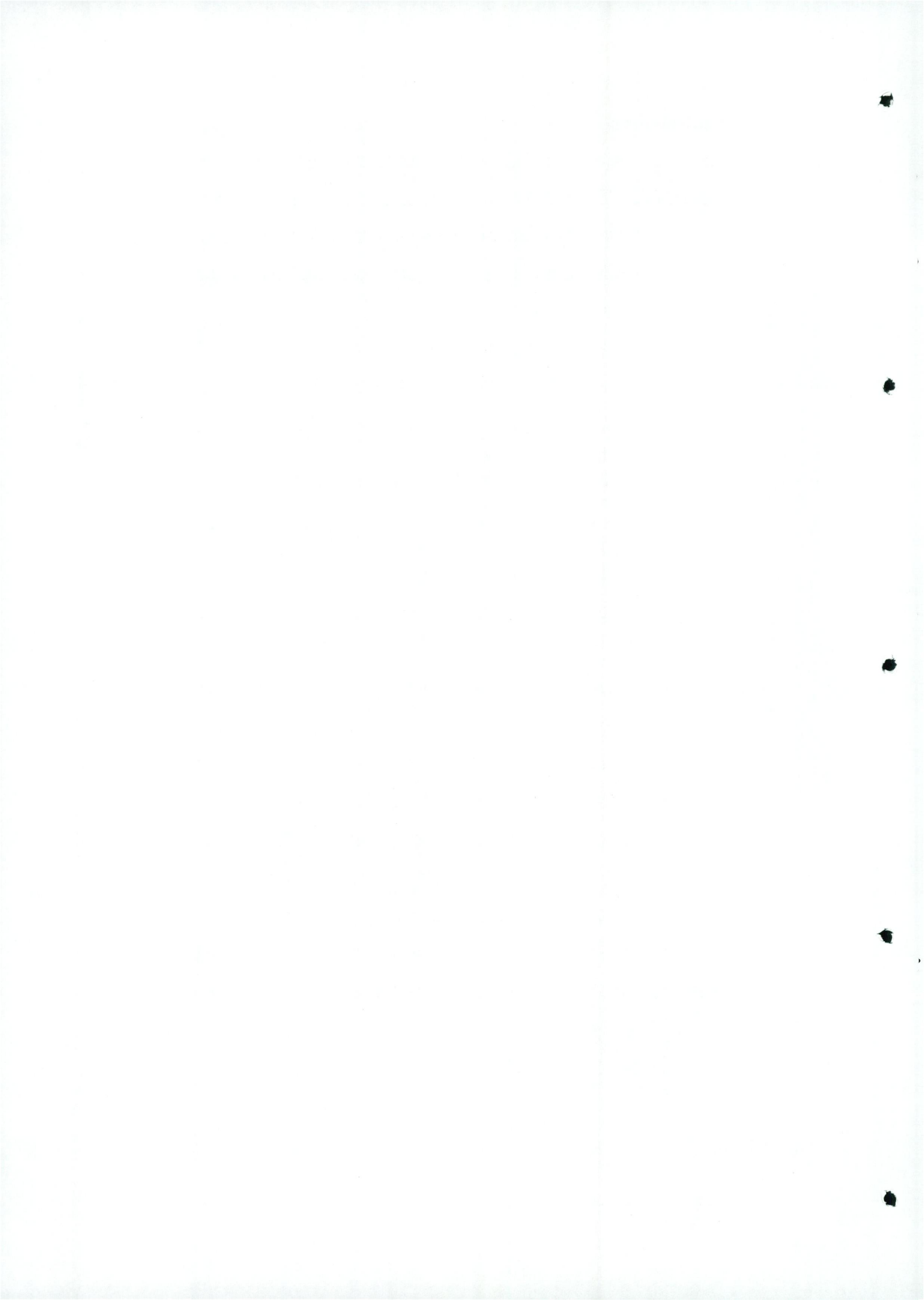
Kahlo was 'trapped' in her existence, an entrapment that was heightened by lengthy periods in a body corset confined to bed. Emotionally she was entrapped by her idolatrous relationship with Rivera. Yet within this entrapment, Kahlo made choices. She chose art as a means of making sense out of her world. She imbued her corset with meaning by painting it. She invested her isolation and confinement with meaning through self portraits to which she added cultural symbols. She was actively involved in her own life. She imbued herself with an Indian identity based on Mexican national consciousness in the foment of post revolution Mexico.

This identification with her Indian past was part of her self-reconstruction that was her life's work. The emergence and development of this Indian identity not only helped her in the wake of her terrible streetcar accident, but perhaps more importantly and possibly more poignantly gave her strength when Rivera abandoned her for his model, her sister Christina.

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<sup>39</sup>Lowe, p 57





The existentialist life style emphasises authenticity in all actions. Kahlo's work bears the hallmark of authenticity. She painted in order to express what was real to her, not to fulfil the conventions of any art movement.

"They thought I was a Surrealist, but I wasn't. I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality." Kahlo<sup>40</sup>

Kahlo's life dictated her art.

"I began to paint twelve years ago, during my convalescence from an automobile accident that forced me to stay in bed for almost a year. During all these years I have worked with the spontaneous impulse of my feelings. I have never followed any school or anyone's influence. I have not expected to get from my work more than the satisfaction of the fact of painting itself and of saying what I could not say in any other way."<sup>41</sup>

Because of her commitment to painting her reality she never fully entered the surrealist obsession with private subconscious images. Firstly, her understanding had its roots in Mexican Indian culture. She acknowledged the importance of history. Secondly, the pain in her body forced her to recognise her anatomy, not only as a direct source of experience, but also as a source of symbols for emotions. She acknowledged the importance of her physical self or body. Thirdly, she was aware of the viewer. Her socialism in politics espoused an art that was accessible to the masses. Hence her symbols were drawn from within the cultures of ancient and modern Mexico, Indian and Western, symbols whose accessibility made them all the more powerful in their impact on the viewer.

"I feel that the reason why Kahlo's work has sustained and has moved people so much is because she painted her own reality, her truth and what's more important in any work of Art or any Life for that matter, her strength was in her ability to show to herself and others the vulnerability of her physical existence, her continuous pain." <sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Frida quoted in Herrera 1983: 266

<sup>41</sup>Frida quoted in Herrera 1983:298

<sup>42</sup>Diego Rivera quoted in Billeter, Erica World of Kahlo p10



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