

ON THE BORDER OF PAIN AND POLITICS:  
FRIDA KAHLO'S SELF-PORTRAIT ON THE BORDERLINE BETWEEN  
MEXICO AND THE UNITED STATES

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In *Self-Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States*, Frida Kahlo explores the double-edged sword of pain and politics. While living in Detroit in 1932 with her husband Diego Rivera, Kahlo experienced a longing for her Mexican roots while growing feelings of disdain towards the United States. Although the U.S. was suffering the lasting effects of job loss from the Great Depression, the economy turned toward mass industrialization, specifically in Detroit, the auto industry. Kahlo depicts this in her self-portrait by dividing the landscape into two almost equal parts: the left Mexico and the right the United States. Kahlo longs for an independent Mexico, untouched by the U.S. and industrialism, and this push and pull between the two countries is strongly emphasized through the division of this piece. While her portrayal of the U.S. is cold and alienated, with silvery buildings stacked against each other and little room for natural elements, she conversely captures the deteriorating state of Mexico with its natural, earthy vegetation, untouched by industrialism. Kahlo paints herself planted awkwardly in the middle, acting as the median between these two countries. During the creation of this piece, Kahlo was living in Detroit alongside her husband Diego Rivera, who was completing murals throughout the U.S. commissioned by some of America's wealthiest families. As Rivera was building relationships with Henry Ford and other political figures through his work in the U.S., Kahlo was dealing with her first miscarriage and her separation from Mexico. The feelings of pain and discomfort are strongly symbolized in this piece, along with her political views of Mexico and the U.S. This paper will further explore the negative emotional effects Kahlo experienced while living in Detroit, along with her political beliefs about Mexico and the U.S. by comparing the work of Kahlo and Rivera during this time, analyzing the iconology of the piece, and examining Kahlo's political beliefs.



Frida Kahlo was born on July 6, 1907, in Coyoacán, Mexico. Born to Guillermo and Matilde Kahlo, she was one of four daughters.<sup>1</sup> Her father was a well-respected photographer but struggled to earn a living due to the effects of the Mexican Revolution. Although her family struggled with money and health issues, Kahlo had a relatively happy and loving childhood. At the age of six, she contracted polio, which caused her right leg to shrink slightly. Her father, although dealing with his own health concerns, stayed by her side and took care of her.

Her life took a terrible turn on September 17, 1925. On the way home from school, eighteen-year-old Frida Kahlo experienced a traumatizing bus accident that led to a lifetime of pain and health problems (including trouble with pregnancies). During the tragic accident, she was impaled with a pole from the outside of her hip, tearing into her uterus. She only painted this accident once (see page 5.), as she didn't want to think about it again. Confined to a bed for three months, Kahlo experienced depressive thoughts, not being able to go outside or do anything but lie down. She then began to paint, pouring her emotions into her work, and filling her time with a new creative expression. She had a special easel made, and a mirror attached to her ceiling, so she could paint herself. Her self-portraits became a dominant subject of her work moving forward and would be remembered for them. In 1928, Kahlo was introduced to her future husband, Diego Rivera, through her friend Tina Modotti. As he was at the beginning of his prosperous artistic career, Kahlo was quite enthralled with his murals and wanted his professional opinion of her own work. He was extremely impressed with her paintings, admiring the brutal authenticity she captured.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrea Kettenmann and Frida Kahlo. *Frida Kahlo, 1907-1954: Pain and Passion*. Benedikt Taschen, 2000. 7

Rivera later shared:

She [is] the first woman in the history of art to treat, with absolute and uncompromising honesty, one might even say with impassive cruelty, those general and specific themes which exclusively affect women.<sup>2</sup>

Eventually, Rivera became a mentor for Kahlo, and this mentorship blossomed into a profound respect and love for one another. On August 21st, 1929, Kahlo and Rivera wed.<sup>3</sup> Rivera became a huge influence on Kahlo and her work. She was completely in love with him, and this love consumed her. She wrote several love letters to and about Rivera. In one of Kahlo's many letters to Rivera, she writes:

I love you more than my own skin and even though you don't love me the same way, you love me anyways, don't you? And if you don't, I'll always have the hope that you do, and I'm satisfied with that. Love me a little. I adore you.<sup>4</sup>

Rivera was much more known for his work during their lifetimes, while Kahlo followed in his shadow. He received various commissions in Mexico, until eventually, he received commissions in the United States. Kahlo was more so resistant to the move but went along with her husband to stay close to him. In 1932, they moved to Detroit, Michigan for Rivera's work. There, Kahlo created one of her most politically ambitious and emotionally rich paintings while dealing with the pain of isolation from home.

Frida Kahlo's *Self-portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States* (hereinafter referred to as *Borderline*) is a multi-layered landscape portrait, split in half by the representations of Mexico and the United States (Fig. 1). This piece was created with oil paint on a copper plate, 12 ½ by 13 ¾ inches, making it a smaller piece in scale. The medium of oil on copper plate is intentional and symbolic on Kahlo's part due to its historic significance in Mexican art.

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<sup>2</sup> Kettenmann and Kahlo. *Frida Kahlo, 1907-1954: Pain and Passion*. Benedikt Taschen, 2000. 53

<sup>3</sup> Kettenmann and Kahlo. *Frida Kahlo, 1907-1954: Pain and Passion*. Benedikt Taschen, 2000. 22

<sup>4</sup> *Frida Kahlo Quotes*, [www.kahlo.org/quotes/](http://www.kahlo.org/quotes/). Accessed 6 Oct. 2023.

Otherwise, known as *ex-votos* or *retablos*, these small-in-scale oil paintings on tin or copper plates are used by Mexican artists to tell stories of spiritual experiences along with traumatic events. They gained popularity among untrained Mexican artists during the 19th century, for the purpose of sharing indigenous spiritual stories after being overthrown by Colonial influences.<sup>5</sup> Their small scale is helpful for trade and collecting among the people. Kahlo first experimented with this medium after her tragic bus incident in 1925 which left her with serious injuries. She discovered a retablo that closely resembled her accident, adding personal touches to make it her own (Fig. 2). Kahlo continued to use the *retablo ex-votos* within her practice throughout her time as an artist, especially when depicting emotionally charged images, which is similarly seen in her *Borderline* retablo. Both Kahlo and Rivera shared a deep love for Pre-Columbian and Aztec works and collected over 2,000 retablos.<sup>6</sup> Kahlo created her *Borderline* painting with the same *retablo ex-voto* method to connect with her Mexican roots while in the U.S., as well as to evoke her isolated emotional state.

Although this painting is referred to as a self-portrait, it can also be viewed as an autobiographical piece because of Kahlo's heavy use of symbolic elements and landscape to reflect recent events in her life. Kahlo paints herself in the near middle of the landscape, between Mexico and the U.S., acting as the dividing factor or median. Frida stands closer to the right side, revealing more of Mexico's earthy vegetation and landscape. This could be a purposeful decision to either draw more attention to Mexico or to act as an indication of her living preference. Frida gazes upon the viewer in an almost confrontational way, beckoning the viewer to make her decision for her: Mexico or the U.S.? She wears a long pink dress with white lace arm covers,

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<sup>5</sup> María A. Castro-Sethness, "Frida Kahlo's Spiritual World: The Influence of Mexican Retablo and Ex-Voto Paintings on Her Art." *Woman's Art Journal* 25, no. 2 (2004): 22.

<sup>6</sup> Castro-Sethness, "Frida Kahlo's Spiritual World: The Influence of Mexican Retablo and Ex-Voto Paintings on Her Art." 21.

standing out against the neutral, grayish tones of the painting, looking almost awkward in the space. This choice of clothing is unusual for Kahlo as she usually wears indigenous dresses, as Rivera preferred her embodying her Mexican culture. “In Frida Kahlo, who wore Mexican costumes, Diego Rivera saw ‘the personification of all national glory’.”<sup>7</sup> Kahlo often wore these Mexican “costumes” or Tehuana dresses after marrying Rivera to please him and represent her Mexican heritage. So for Kahlo to depict herself in this seemingly European-influenced pink dress shows her disconnect to her Mexican roots while living in the U.S., perhaps also revealing her progressive detachment from Rivera.

Furthermore, her hands rest crisscrossed on her waist, the left holding a Mexican flag and the right a cigarette. The flag is a symbol of her cultural pride, and the cigarette perhaps shows Frida’s way of dealing with a stressful decision. Because Rivera was commissioned to complete murals in San Francisco, New York, and Detroit, the move to the U.S. may have been less of a decision that Kahlo was able to make, and something she had to be dragged along for because of her husband’s work. She writes in a letter to Dr. Eloesser (a close friend and doctor of Rivera and Kahlo):

...seems like a shabby old village [Detroit]. I don’t like it at all, but I am happy because Diego is working very happily here, and he has found a lot of materials for his frescoes that he will do in the museum. He is enchanted by the factories, the machines, etc. like a child with a new toy.<sup>8</sup>

While in Detroit, Rivera created a mural inspired and commissioned by Henry Ford’s auto industry. Rivera’s *Detroit Industry* mural portrays the boom of America’s auto industry and technological advancements. (Fig. 3). Finished in 1933, just a year after Kahlo’s piece, Rivera shares similar imagery with Kahlo’s portrait with his use of large, silver machinery, despite their

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<sup>7</sup> Kettenmann and Kahlo. *Frida Kahlo, 1907-1954: Pain and Passion*. Benedikt Taschen, 2000. 26

<sup>8</sup> Gerry Souter and Frida Kahlo. *Frida Kahlo: Beneath the Mirror*. Sirrocco, 2010. 75

differences in scale. He depicts working men tugging and pulling the equipment; their faces are worn and angry (Fig. 4). Rivera is calling attention to Detroit's labor industry and possibly its harmful effects. He represents different races and backgrounds of workers in his mural to comment on equality in the workplace. Rivera juxtaposes this industrial landscape with reddish, natural elements at the top of the mural, perhaps drawing a parallel to Mexico, which is also exhibited in Kahlo's piece (Fig. 5). Rivera calls into question the strenuous relationship between land and labor and how the boom of technology, while a positive thing, may also steal the beauty of the land's natural resources. There is this reflection of similar subjects that Kahlo and Rivera both touch on, drawing influence from the other and their surroundings.

Henry Ford, the maker of Ford automobiles, developed an unlikely friendship with Diego Rivera. *Detroit's Industry* mural was commissioned by William Valentiner and paid for by Henry Ford's son, Edsel Ford.<sup>9</sup> He was told to capture the "spirit" of Detroit.<sup>10</sup> Rivera was commissioned to do murals in San Francisco, Detroit, and New York by America's wealthiest families. His motives became questionable as to why he would work with these big names who dealt in shady, political deals, especially since Rivera claimed himself to be a revolutionary and usually commented on the ugliness of America's riches. This is seen in Rivera's *Wall Street Banquet* mural (Fig. 6). Completed in 1928, Rivera mocks the world of "high finance" by portraying Ford, Rockefeller, and J.P. Morgan dining around a long table with other well-known guests<sup>11</sup>. A gold register dispenses a stream of gold paper which wraps around the table, being consumed by the guests. This piece is a highly critical and satirical commentary on America's hunger for wealth, which Rivera seemed to despise. This appears very hypocritical on Rivera's

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<sup>9</sup> Alex Goodall, "The Battle Of Detroit And Anti-Communism In The Depression Era," *The Historical Journal* 51 no. 2 (2008): 457.

<sup>10</sup> Goodall, "The Battle Of Detroit And Anti-Communism In The Depression Era," *The Historical Journal* 51 no. 2 (2008): 463.

<sup>11</sup> Goodall, "The Battle Of Detroit And Anti-Communism In The Depression Era," 461.



part, as later, he accepted commissions for murals by Ford and Rockefeller, which both praised their advances in America's technology. Although it is not completely certain why Rivera took the commissions, some thought he was swayed by booze and cash, while others thought he had a hidden agenda to share his Communist beliefs through hidden motifs found in his murals. "The theme of the murals was to be 'the Spirit of Detroit'. To Rivera, the spirit of Detroit, that most industrial of cities, lay hidden in its factories, the reason he had been so eager to travel to the city in the first place."<sup>12</sup> As Kahlo had written in her letter, Rivera was like a kid in a toy shop, fascinated by the industrial landscape of Detroit. He studied the factories closely and grew a deep admiration for America's prosperous industrial systems and Ford's modern inventions.

Later, Rivera states:

Regretted that Henry Ford was a capitalist and one of the richest men on earth. I did not feel free to praise him as long and as loudly as I wanted to, since that would put me under the suspicion of sycophancy, of flattering the rich. Otherwise, I should have attempted to write a book presenting Henry Ford as I saw him, a true poet and artist, one of the greatest in the world.<sup>13</sup>

Ford let go of thousands of workers and used his company for questionable political agendas. As Ford found himself in the midst of a scandal, Rivera was thought to have played a part in the American Anti-Communist Party by creating murals that praised Ford's industrial, modern inventions.<sup>14</sup> As Alex Goodall argues, "Diego Rivera, a one-time member of the Mexican Communist Party, seems to have allowed his fascination with the organizing and productive power of technology to moderate his Marxist ideals."<sup>15</sup> Rivera's *Detroit Industry* mural consisted of four separate sections: North, South, East, and West walls. Painted on the interior of the Detroit Institute for the Arts, these four separate walls portrayed Rivera's

<sup>12</sup> Goodall, "The Battle Of Detroit And Anti-Communism In The Depression Era," 464.

<sup>13</sup> Goodall, "The Battle Of Detroit And Anti-Communism In The Depression Era," 464.

<sup>14</sup> Goodall, "The Battle Of Detroit And Anti-Communism In The Depression Era," 466.

<sup>15</sup> Mike McKiernan. "Diego Rivera Detroit Industry (1932–1933)." *Occupational medicine (Oxford)* 59, no. 4 (2009): 218

perspective of booming industrial labor, technological advancements within America, as well as its potential harm to humanity and the environment. All of this is reflected on the right side of Frida Kahlo's painting, showing the impact that Rivera's business with Ford had made on Kahlo's work and her mental state. Kahlo uses Ford's influence on Detroit's economy (and the U.S.) to represent how she views America. However, whereas Rivera may see Ford's industry as admirable and positive, Kahlo seems to have a more hesitant, negative approach to the industrialism of America.

In the *Borderline* landscape, Kahlo's crossed arms add a directional value to the piece, pointing the viewers' eyes to each side of the landscape. To the right of the landscape, Kahlo portrays the United States during its state of Industrialism and changing times in America similar to Rivera, however she takes on a much different approach. Kahlo paints a grid-like display of America with grey-toned skyscrapers. These buildings stack against each other, leaving little room for much else to be seen. There are little to no natural elements, showing America's lack of environmental prosperity. Even the "roots" that reach into the soil are wires instead of natural roots, further showing the robbery of agriculture from industrial factories and power plants. The logo "Ford" is written across four steam pipes, which blow heavy, thick smoke upward. The American Flag is represented underneath the pillowy clouds, commenting on Ford's contribution to pollution, perhaps revealing it as a serious problem in America. The brown building underneath the Ford pipes looks almost identical to Henry Ford's hospital (Fig. 7). The year that the *Borderline* piece was created, Kahlo suffered from a miscarriage at the Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit on July 4th, 1932.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ellen G Landau, *Woman's Art Journal* 37, no. 1 (2016): 56–58.

The emotional and physical effects of this miscarriage must have created disdain and negative feelings for Kahlo while being in the Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit. She created a piece entitled *Henry Ford's Hospital* using the same *retablo ex-voto* technique as she used for her *Borderline* self-portrait (Fig. 8). Because this form of medium is intended for telling stories of deep trauma, it is fitting that Kahlo utilizes the *ex-voto* technique for this painful experience. This piece presents Frida lying naked in a hospital bed, the white sheets drenched in blood from her uterus. There is a tear falling from her eye, again expressing her emotional torment after the incident. Six red strings float around her, attached to symbolic objects. One of these objects being a silver piece of machinery, similar to the electronic objects represented in the bottom right corner of Kahlo's *Borderline* painting. These electrical instruments could represent hospital equipment used on Kahlo during her time at Henry Ford's Hospital. Neutral, dreary colors remain constant in her *Henry Ford's Hospital* scene. An industrial factory landscape hovers in the horizon line of the background. As Philip Darbyshire interprets, "Kahlo is again utterly alone in her pain and distress. Ironically, far away on the horizon of the barren landscape lies the Ford car plant, where Rivera was painting a mural."<sup>17</sup> The Henry Ford Hospital and Factory had become a source of her pain and loneliness, clearly represented in her paintings. There is a lack of her husband's presence in any of these works, Kahlo remains isolated in tears with the loss of her child.

Additionally, she created a lithograph in response to her miscarriage entitled *El Aborto* (Frida Kahlo and The Miscarriage) (Fig. 9). This emotional illustration shows Frida standing up, naked and in distress. Tears stream from her eyes, while another liquid falls from her uterus. Plants with visible roots are depicted by her left foot, similar to the rooted plants seen in Kahlo's

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<sup>17</sup> Philip Darbyshire, "Understanding The Life of Illness," *Advances in Nursing Science* 17, no. 1 (September 1994) 51-59.

*Borderline* self-portrait. A weeping, down-turned moon is shown in the right corner, another piece of imagery reflected in her painting. Insight into Kahlo's deep emotional turmoil is revealed when piecing together the paintings she created in 1932. Moving between Kahlo's *Borderline* piece and her other works created in 1932, corresponding imagery builds on top of each other to create a narrative. Kahlo's works read similar to diary entries, spilling her emotions and thoughts on her difficult circumstances. It is increasingly evident, moving through the body of works created in 1932, that Kahlo is suffering from depressive thoughts revolving around her miscarriage, her marriage, and her life in the United States. The lack of Rivera's presence in any of these works contributes greatly to Kahlo's suffering because while he occupies his time studying Ford's factories, Kahlo bides her time alone, pouring her grief into her works.

Another compelling indication of Kahlo's negative mental state is the gray stone that she stands on in *Borderline*. There is an inscription on the front of it that reads "Carmen Rivera Pinto Su Retrato Eu Ano D 1932", translating to "Carmen Rivera Painted Her Portrait in 1932". Kahlo's full name is Magdalena Frida Carmen Kahlo Calderón. "Written on the front of the block are one of her forenames and her husband's surname, as well as the date of the painting. In this manner, she identifies herself as Diego's wife, which lends her social status."<sup>18</sup> Apart from Kahlo using the inscription to insert her social status as Diego's wife, she also uses it to allude to her death. The stone is comparable to a headstone, plugged into a similar electrical device, that is portrayed in her *Henry Ford Hospital* painting. Perhaps Kahlo's way of representing the death of her baby is to represent the death of herself as well, symbolically. She may be insinuating this, by inscribing another form of her name and the year of her miscarriage, that a version of herself died with her unborn baby.

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<sup>18</sup> Frida Kahlo, Helga Prignitz-Poda, and Peter von Becker. *Frida Kahlo: Retrospective*. Prestel, 2010. 100

On the day of Kahlo's miscarriage, she exclaims in agony to Rivera's assistant Lucienne Bloch:

I wish I was dead! I don't know why I have to go on living like this!<sup>19</sup>

The grief she felt from her miscarriage and progressive detachment from Rivera and Mexico reflects itself in her use of saturated symbolism in her *Borderline* piece. The electrical device that plugs into the headstone comes from the U.S. side, while its wires sink into the soil and stretch into Mexico's territory, intertwining with the roots of Mexico's vegetation. This creates an intersection between Mexico and the United States, showing them not only as two separate countries, but also as two places that intersect in Kahlo's mind. The flora that Kahlo paints is not only a representation of Mexico's native vegetation but also a representation of her miscarriage. "...the pasque flower among the flowers next to her, a poisonous plant used medically to induce abortions."<sup>20</sup> Kahlo uses the flora in her work to further explain her miscarriage and brings it over from the Henry Ford Hospital into Mexico's territory, revealing more of an intertwinement between these two spaces.

The pain that Kahlo associates with the United States is further explored on the left side (Mexico) of the *Borderline* painting. But whereas the right portrays a cold, alienated view of the U.S., the left side portrays a more destructive, wild view of Mexico.

Carol E. Miller describes this dead landscape in *The Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*:

In Mexico, everything is dead.  
The dead tell the longest stories  
in bone, rock, and ruins.  
And from these stories, seeds,  
and from these seeds, flowers  
for the dead dancing among us  
like the voices of rain.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Gerry Souter and Frida Kahlo. *Frida Kahlo: Beneath the Mirror*. Sirrocco, 2010. 78

<sup>20</sup> Kahlo. *Frida Kahlo: Retrospective*. Prestel, 2010. 100

<sup>21</sup> Carol E. Miller. "Self-Portrait on the Border Line between Mexico and the United States, Frida Kahlo, 1932." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 17, no. 3 (1996): 101–101.

Miller illustrates the desolate land of Mexico, describing it as a dead land of rocks and ruins. Kahlo paints Mexico in the state of the past while portraying the U.S. in the present. While Mexico stands still, frozen in its past, the U.S. moves toward a more futuristic present. Additionally, among these rocks and ruins, Kahlo voices her cultural pride for Mexico and its Aztec origins. Kahlo's pride in her birth city, Mexico City, motivated her to get involved with Mexican politics. Kahlo joined the Communist Party in the 1920s, advocating for independence and Stalin's view of Nationalism.<sup>22</sup>

Kahlo writes in 1931:

Mexico is, as always, disorganized and messed up. The only thing it has left is the great beauty of the land and of the Indians. Every day, the ugly part of the United States steals a piece; it is a shame, but people have to eat, and it is inevitable that the big fish eat the small one.<sup>23</sup>

In this letter, addressed to Dr. Leo Eloesser, Frida Kahlo expresses her adoration for her land and her resentment towards the U.S. for robbing it of its beauty, perhaps also robbing her of her baby. This is indicated in the *Borderline* painting, with the electrical instruments resting on the U.S. side, wires seeping into the earth, and infiltrating Mexico's soil and vegetation. Here, Kahlo communicates the effect of America's industrialism and politics, which cause destruction. Concern to preserve Mexico's indigenous culture and architecture is indicated in Kahlo's depiction of a decrypt temple and mound of rocks, resting in the background to the left. It is a nostalgic view of Mexico's precolonial past. As Leyuan states, "Moreover, the temple in the background is half-destroyed, and a faultline runs across the ground in front of it, possibly hinting at the slow disintegration of the 'great beauty of the land and of the Indians', an explicit

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<sup>22</sup> Ma Leyuan, "Frida Kahlo's Self-Identity: An Analysis of Self-Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States," *International Journal of Social Science Studies* 8, no. 6 (November 2020): 11

<sup>23</sup> Leyuan, "Frida Kahlo's Self-Identity: An Analysis of Self-Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States," 11

concern for the survival of Mexico's indigenous culture in the modern, turbulent world."<sup>24</sup> Kahlo expresses this concern for Mexico's survival in the modern, turbulent world by creating a stark contrast between Mexico's ruins and America's modern prosperity. The wires of the U.S. seep into the soil, stealing the beauty of Mexico's indigenous beauty.

Kahlo developed a deep affinity for Aztec and pre-colonial art, especially after the Mexican Revolution, which began valuing ancient Mexico and its pre-colonial roots. This is reflected in most of her paintings through her heavy use of Aztec imagery, as she voices her desires for an Independent Mexico, strong in its cultural identity, unaffected by the modernity of the U.S. Rivera expresses this same concern in his *Detroit Industry* mural. Although Rivera reveals more of his adoration for Ford's modern industrial advancements through this mural, he also creates a duality between modern technological advancements and the disruption they may cause to nature and human life (Fig. 10). He includes Aztec and Mexican motifs on some panels of the mural to create a push and pull between science and life, similar to Kahlo in her *Borderline* painting (Fig. 11).

Furthermore, Kahlo expresses her disinterest in America's social and political values in her piece *My Dress Was There Hanging* (Fig. 12). Created in 1933-1938, this multi-faceted piece incorporates American monuments and symbols bunched together in a chaotic manner. Skyscrapers stack against each other, reflected back to *Borderline*. Kahlo represents a chaotic environment crowded with people, buildings, and factories, frowning upon America's capitalistic mentality. In the center of the painting stands two columns, one holding a toilet and the other a gold trophy. They are linked together by a blue ribbon, perhaps insinuating the meaningless

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<sup>24</sup> Leyuan, "Frida Kahlo's Self-Identity: An Analysis of Self-Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States," 11

prioritization of Americans' desire for gain. Kahlo "points to social decay and the destruction of fundamental human values."<sup>25</sup> Hanging from the blue ribbon is a Mexican-style Tehuana dress, however, she is absent from it, unlike most of her paintings where she is the focal point. Her absence is loud in this noisy landscape. Her dress does not separate the chaos but hangs in the middle of it. Symbolically, Kahlo hangs loosely in the middle of America's politics and turbulent society, as she was dragged to the U.S. by her husband. In Kahlo's letter to Isabel Campos in 1933 she writes:

Here in Gringolandia I spend my days dreaming of going back to Mexico, but for Diego's work it's been absolutely necessary to stay here.<sup>26</sup>

Although far from home, Kahlo still retains a piece of her Mexican identity by representing her Tehuana dress, a type of dress that Rivera was very fond of. Perhaps painting the Tehuana dress hanging on by an unsteady string is Kahlo trying to save not only a piece of her Mexican identity but also a desire to cling to her marriage.

At the bottom of this landscape, Kahlo collages images from the Great Depression to create a contrast between America's poverty and its riches.<sup>27</sup> Comparable to the contrast in *Borderline*, Kahlo creates strong division within these two pieces to reveal her seemingly black-and-white view on American and Mexican politics. Although she was not entirely opposed to some perks of capitalism, Kahlo paints it out to have more malicious intent than anything else. She was disgusted by what it represented and how it only really prospered the wealthy, leaving the lower classes to fend for themselves. Kahlo fully embraced the *Mexicanidad* movement, a movement that is strong in its indigenous culture and ancient Mexican roots.

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<sup>25</sup> Andrea Kettenmann and Frida Kahlo. *Frida Kahlo, 1907-1954: Pain and Passion*. Benedikt Taschen, 2000. 36

<sup>26</sup> Margaret A. Lindauer and Frida Kahlo. *Devouring Frida: the Art History and Popular Celebrity of Frida Kahlo*. Hanover [N.H: University Press of New England, 1999. 120

<sup>27</sup> Janice Helland. "Aztec Imagery in Frida Kahlo's Paintings: Indigeneity and Political Commitment." *Woman's Art Journal* 11, no. 2 (1990): 9



Rivera and Kahlo differed in this way. Although Rivera was proud of his Mexican heritage, he was also a strong supporter of modern thoughts and inventions. Kahlo was more resistant to this new-age change and wanted to preserve indigenous aspects.

In conclusion, piecing together Kahlo's *Borderline* and *My Dress Was There Hanging* paintings, two of her most politically ambitious works, it is evident where Kahlo stands. Although she stands on the borderline of the U.S. and Mexico, she expresses her longing for Mexico while being stuck in America. During her time in the U.S., moving between San Francisco, Detroit, and New York, Kahlo critiques America's politics, industrial revolution, and capitalistic mentality. In her *Self-portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States*, Kahlo creates division between these two countries, with herself as the dividing median. She stands awkwardly in place between a destructive, naturalistic Mexico and an alienated, industrialized America. Through this landscape, she expresses her disdain for America's capitalism and its robbery of Mexico's indigenous beauty through the electrical wires which infiltrate Mexico's soil. Along with the political ideas that Kahlo comments on in this *retablo ex-voto*, she also expresses the pain associated with residing in Detroit. Between the miscarriage she experienced in the Henry Ford Hospital and the feeling of isolation from her Mexican roots and her husband, Kahlo uses her passion for painting as a form of escapism and political expression as she stands on the border of pain and politics. In Kahlo's autobiography, she wrote in 1953:

My paintings are well-painted, not nimbly but patiently. My paintings contain in them the message of pain. I think that at least a few are interested in it. It's not revolutionary. Why keep wishing for it to be belligerent? I can't. Painting completed my life. I lost three children and a series of other things that would have fulfilled my horrible life. My painting took the place of all of this. I think work is the best.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Souter, Gerry, and Frida Kahlo. *Frida Kahlo: Beneath the Mirror*. Sirrocco, 2010. 251



Fig. 1, Frida Kahlo, *Self-portrait On The Borderline Between Mexico and the United States*, 1932. Oil on Copper Plate. 12 ½ x 13 ¾ inches. Detroit Institute of Arts.

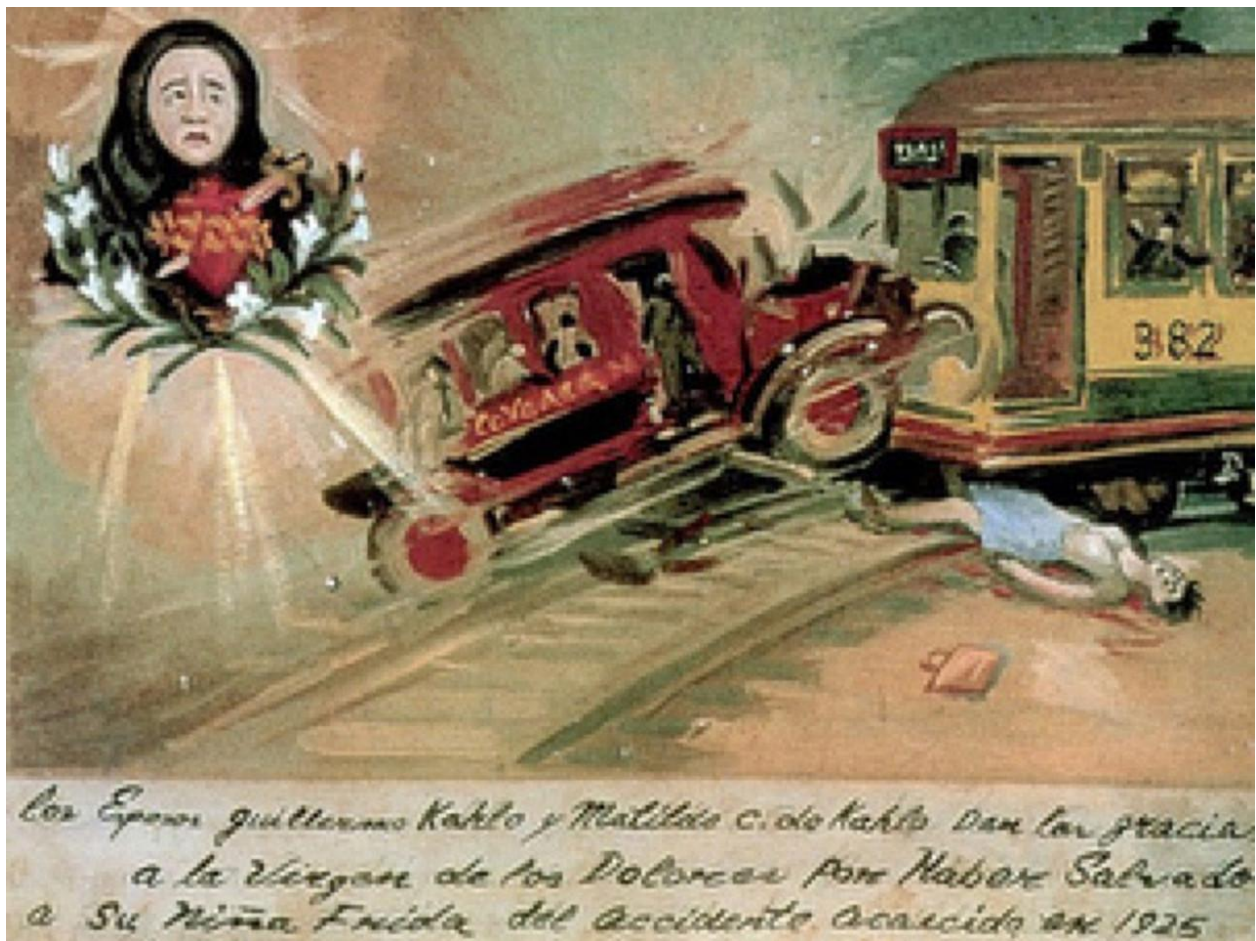


Fig. 2, Frida Kahlo, *Retablo*, 1943. Oil on metal. 7 ½ x 9 ½ inches. Private Collection.

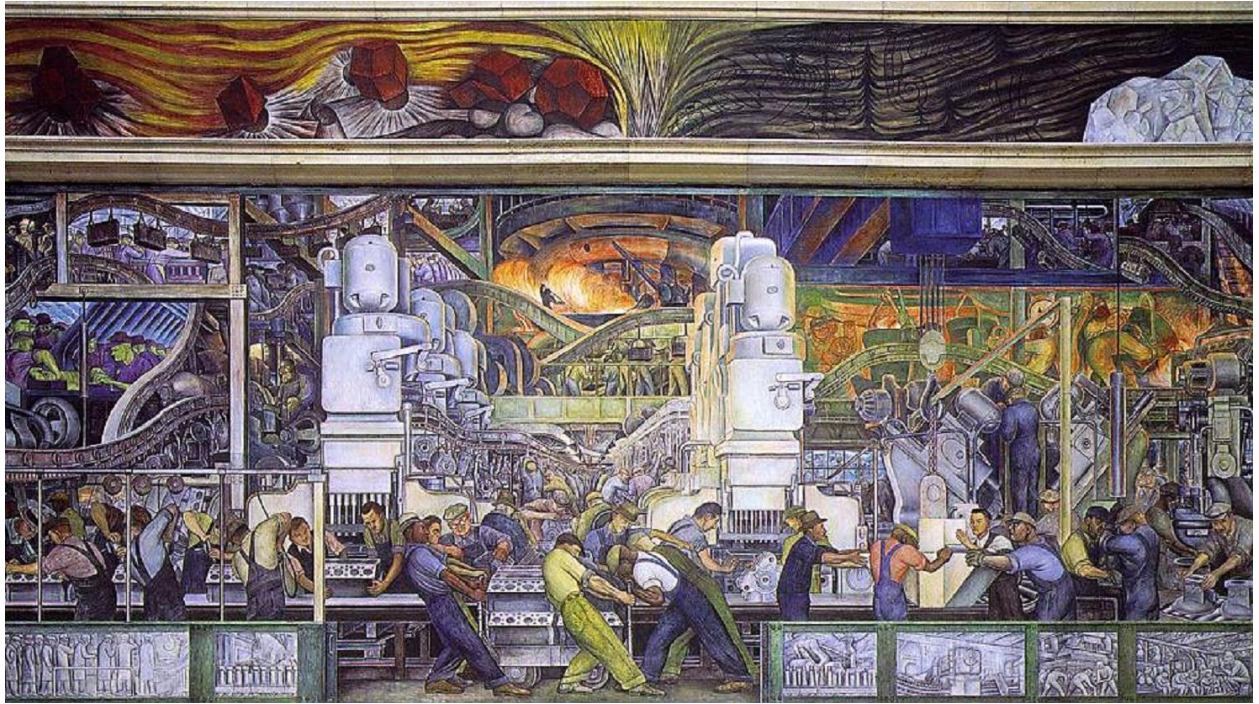


Fig. 3, Diego Rivera, *Detroit Industry Mural*, 1933. Detroit Institute for the Arts.



Fig. 4, Diego Rivera, *Detroit Industry Mural*, 1933.



Fig. 5, Diego Rivera, *Detroit Industry Mural*, 1933.



Fig. 6, Diego Rivera, *Wall Street Banquet* mural. 80 x 61 inches. Mexico City, Mexico.



Fig. 7, Henry Ford Hospital. Detroit, MI.



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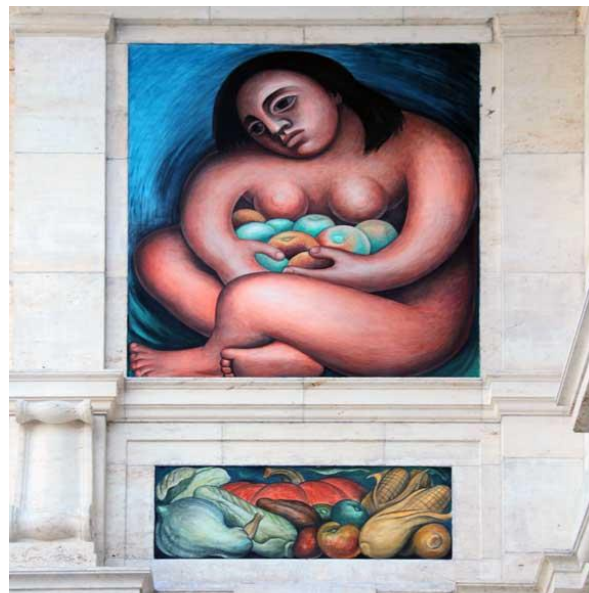


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