



The Painted Face

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All through the ages artists have explored self-portraiture as a key to immortality. Mexican artist Frida Kahlo painted more than 60 self-portraits in her short and tragic life. But they were not a documentation of her beauty - rather, they were an intimate diary of her physical and psychological life. As she famously said *“I paint self-portraits because I am so often alone, because I am the person I know best.”*

“The Painted Face” was conceived as a tribute to the iconic artist on her 111th birth anniversary. An ArtExposure-Range initiative, it had 13 Indian artists re-creating her self-portraits in their own medium and aesthetic. What emerged was an unexpected cultural dialogue of two diverse countries – Mexico and India.

Frida Kahlo adopted the then-popular classic self-portrait and completely subverted the format. A victim of a crippling accident and a strong believer in herself, she questioned the very idea of ‘ideal feminine beauty’ both in art and in life. She focused instead on her individuality as an artist of Mexican descent. She looked for answers within her own family, one of mixed German-Mexican ancestry, and used the story of her eventful life as her artistic



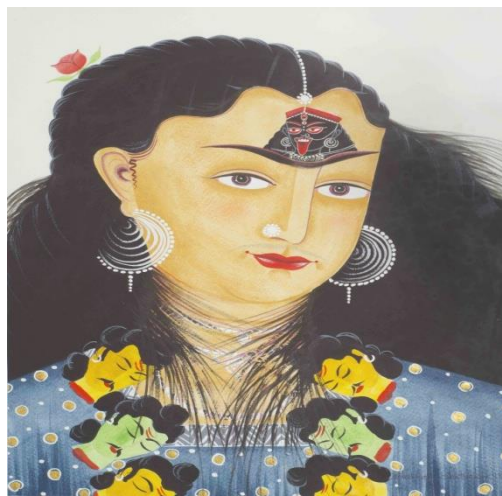
metaphor for suffering, growth and release. In the process, she involved the aesthetics of Mexican folk art into her paintings.

Frida's paintings are like the performances of women artists today, celebrating the 'self'. She is seen today as a fore-runner of contemporary art, and a symbol of non-conformity. She is easily one of the most instantly recognizable artists of the world.

Young artist Arpita Akhanda responded to the concept of the show with a series of woven prints that skilfully combine installation with performance. Speaking of the performative aspects of Frida in her work, Arpita says : *“for Frida her canvas was her body and for me my body becomes my canvas.”*



“Frida in me” is a set of passport-sized photo prints, woven to morph the face of the Mexican artist into the face of the Indian one. But the gaze remains steadfast, the eye critical. It is a one-on-one performance with the artist as protagonist-audience-critic. This is the Frida-effect on contemporary art – she has inspired and will continue to inspire artists who use their own body as a site for exploring the fragility and the strength of the human condition under stress.



Bhaskar Chitrakar lives in Kalighat, near the famous Kali temple of Kolkata and actively practices the centuries-old patachitra art form. When introduced to the art of Frida Kahlo, he resonated with her love of colour, animals and flowers, the symbolism in her works, her respect for her ancestry, her clothes, her gaze. And the “Kali-Kahlo” series was born. Bhaskar used the traditional medium of powder pigments on paper for his self-portraits of Frida in Kalighat. But Indian ethnic wear replaced Mexican costume, marigolds and gul-mohors took the place of exotic flowers, the cat and monkey took on a local air. What remained unchanged was the essence of the woman, her steadfast gaze, her untrimmed unibrow, her mask-like face appropriating her viewer.

Frida Kahlo used the iconography of pre-Columbian and Christian mythology in her paintings. Her face is deadpan, surrounded by visual cues which allow the viewer to decipher its deeper meaning. Bhaskar draws on the iconography of Bengal and its myriad gods and

Caesurae Special

Art and cultural transmission



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL3: 1 (ISSN 2454 -9495)

DECEMBER 2018

(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

goddesses and symbols, to present Frida as a visitor to Kalighat, dressed in Bengali clothes, ribbons in her hair, and the trademark monkey and cat perched on her shoulders. The ‘third-eye’ symbol on her forehead, carrying Diego’s face becomes the ‘bindi’ with the face of the powerful goddess Kali. Her bead necklace becomes a garland of heads.

Bhaskar’s patachitras use symbols to represent his culture and those who people his life. Kahlo’s symbols are painful articulations of her life and her female identity - small pins, surgical instruments, foetuses, thorns, flowing hair, hummingbirds and wild monkeys. She is both warrior and a martyr. Bhaskar respects her courage, and re-creates her as a strong daughter of Bengal.



Kolkata-born and Chicago-trained artist Viraag Desai’s works straddle the artistry of the East with the non-representation of the West. He moves between arriving at abstraction



through structure – pictorial or cartographic - and arriving at abstraction through process. He gives physicality, but no figuration. The subject reveals itself to the careful viewer.

‘Septum’ is his ode to Frida Kahlo, the portrait of an artist who often tore open her chest to reveal a bleeding heart. Presented as a collection of objects, symbols and textural memories, Viraag’s contemporary piece shows arteries as the network connecting her tissues of memory, her prime incidents of her life. He draws from his science background and cultural habit of intellectualising symbols. He translates her recurring medical imagery in terms of actual found objects like used metal pins and screws from a surgery. Just as Frida used the sensory route to understanding character, Viraag uses found and re-created objects to understand certain aspects and incidents of her life. In his words “....it is person as composite of memories and objects.” Frida’s use of her body as metaphor allowed him to interpret her portrait in the language of conceptual assemblage.





Ram Kumar Manna's name is synonymous with the word 'clay'. His strongly-formed figures with their rough surface texture have a sensitivity yet a tactile strength never seen before in terracotta sculpture. The artist in him pondered for weeks over the portraits of Frida Kahlo, thinking, conceptualising, sketching. His two busts of Frida are poignantly severe. He saw in Frida's face the sadness and the pride of a beautiful soul.

Frida drew from Aztec mythology. Her portraits incorporate monkeys, skeletons, skulls, blood, and hearts symbolizing dualism and opposites, life and death, pre-modernity and modernity, Mexican and European, male and female.

Ram Kumar drew from Indian mythology to create his standing figure of Frida as Mother Nature. With long curling tendrils, and roses in her hair, she is a primeval goddess, healed and serene, cradling birds, beasts and flowers. Both artists seem to share a common attraction to the metaphysical. Frida used root imagery in her self-portraits to show, in a negative sense, her body being tied to the ground, of being trapped in a situation, and in a positive sense, the imagery of personal growth. RamKumar Manna uses roots as a stabilising force of nature, always ending in shoots, tendrils and flowers. Flowing hair features as a symbol of growth and of the feminine in Kahlo's paintings. In Bengal art, hair is a symbol of feminine beauty and entrapment, but long hair is also a symbol of acceptance of one's societal role.

Deepak Kumar Shaw's artistic concern is with "Hunger" which exists in Indian society in different states and at different levels. Not just an emptiness in the belly, but a longing for more power, more money, more fame. It causes the exploitation of the weak. The food

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problem is an issue which India has faced for many decades, and in order to meet the situation, the rationing system was introduced. Corruption and inefficiency led to failure of the system, causing instead widespread hoarding and speculation of food grains.



Deepak's painting "Wheat bags on the head" is a nod to the same problem as seen by Frida Kahlo during her visit to Detroit in 1932. In a letter to a friend, she wrote: "although I am very interested in all the industrial and mechanical development of United State, since I have seen thousands of people in the most terrible misery without anything to eat and with no place to sleep, that is what most impressed me here, it is terrifying to see the rich people having parties day and night while thousands and thousands of people are dying of hunger".

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Kahlo recognized the conflicts which result from any strong ideology. Throughout her short life she questioned her identity as a Mexican, a woman, a Catholic, Old World and New World, weak yet strong. She re-invented herself as her prime subject - female, Mexican, modern, and powerful. Yet it was not till the late 1980's that her paintings were seen for what they really are – boldly transgressive. Which is why, today, her face is a universal symbol for trauma support and strength.
