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Psyche and Soma: The Body as Canvas. Discussion of “I Made a Picture of My Life — A Life from the Picture: The life of the body in the pictures and writings of Frida Kahlo” by Pirkko Siltala

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It is not surprising that Frida Kahlo became a feminist icon in the early 1980's. Her paintings and her life vividly captured much of what many women were struggling with at that time, and continue to explore today. In “I Made a Picture of My Life—A Life from the Picture: The life of the body in the pictures and writings of Frida Kahlo”, Pirkko Siltala examines an important facet of the infinitely complicated tapestry of Kahlo's work and life: the interweaving of the threads of her physical, emotional and creative experiences. To a great extent, it is, I believe, this aspect of Kahlo's essence that continues to both intrigue and attract viewers today. As Riding (1) recently put it, Kahlo was “an artist whose unflinching portrayal of her own physical and emotional pain spoke not only to a new generation of feminists but also to an era more concerned with feeling than ideology”.

Dr. Siltala has provided us with a very interesting examination of the ways in which Kahlo's body, as portrayed in her paintings and in her writings, symbolizes psychological struggles around the loss of mother (or mothering functions) when a younger sibling was born, when mother withdrew and became depressed, and when a beloved nurse was also lost. The body can, as we know, represent both physical and psychological aspects of the self in a number of different ways. As I have discussed elsewhere (2) bodily representations of unverbalized or unformulated experience can simultaneously communicate, obfuscate and render tolerable unthinkable thoughts and unbearable emotions. To my mind, these issues are ongoing themes in Kahlo's work.

One of the difficulties that accompanies any attempt to understand the unconscious dynamics of an artist through her art and her recorded biography is the fact that she is not available to help translate some of the symbolic meanings of her visual imagery into the different symbolic language of words. Even more of a handicap, to my mind, is the fact that one cannot learn about the manifest and latent qualities of the individual's personality through the actual experience of interacting with her. Siltala copes with this problem through a creative use of Kahlo's personal diaries, her poetry, the numerous biographies of both Kahlo and her husband, Diego Rivera, and Rivera's own writings about Kahlo. It helps that Kahlo herself was quite verbal and insightful. As she once explained, “If I paint myself, it is because it is the subject I know the best” (1). Like all good analysts, Siltala also uses personal images, ideas, and reactions to try to sort through some of the possible meanings of these creations. But analysands themselves deepen the exploration that we, as analysts, can only begin; and they also provide important corrections when we begin to take the work into paths that, no matter how interesting, are not theirs.

Because my own tendency is to focus less on historical or developmental constructions (see, for example, Schafer (3) and Mitchell (4)) and more on current themes that emerge within the analytic work, I found my own inquiry going in a slightly different direction from Dr. Siltala's. In the absence of Kahlo's responses, I will use some material from my work with a young woman client, whom I will call Lisa, who was fascinated by Kahlo. While not necessarily accurate reflections of Kahlo herself, the issues that emerged as Lisa and I explored Lisa's responses to Kahlo's imagery will illustrate another component of the life of the body. Rather than an exploration of the loss of mother, we will find ourselves in a world common to many women, as they struggle to integrate and own a morass of unacceptable feelings, often unspoken and unrecognized, sometimes intolerable, and frequently in conflict with one another.

Lisa was in her early twenties when she began therapy with me, nearly a year after graduating

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from college. Her parents were both professionals, although her mother had not worked since Lisa and her younger siblings were born. Problems in the marriage, depression and withdrawal on the part of both parents were certainly factors in Lisa's development, and could unquestionably be meaningfully used to conceptualize her current difficulties. I found it far more useful, however, to explore feelings which were interfering with her ability to pursue a career or develop socially, and which were manifest in a variety of both subtle and obvious ways in her day to day living, but, as Hirsch (5) has put it, “were barely if at all allowed to register in the first place” (5:789). For example, Lisa was unable to look for work, engage in social activities, or otherwise enjoy her life, but she did not know that she was depressed or even that she was unhappy. She came to seem me, reluctantly, because her parents urged her to seek help. But she did not know what was wrong. Although there were, of course, many complex and fascinating components to Lisa's story, I will limit my discussion to an aspect that is particularly relevant to the discussion of the life of the body.

A soft-spoken, friendly and articulate young woman, Lisa was strikingly beautiful. Tall, slender yet shapely, she had beautiful features and thick, straight black hair that reached to the middle of her back. When I first met her, she was dressed all in black, with her hair pulled straight back into a tight pony tail. She wore no makeup, but each ear was pierced at least six times, and she wore numerous rings on her fingers and silver bracelets on her arms. During the course of the initial consultation, she told me that she also wore a nose ring, “but I don't wear it on interviews, and I thought I should check you out before I wore it here”. (At that time, body piercing was not as popular in the United States as it has since become) I have described elsewhere (6) some of my thoughts about the importance of exploring a woman's choice of clothing. This concept applies also to body piercing and tatooing, as well as to daydreams about the way a woman wishes she looked (whether she wants to be thinner, heavier, softer, rounder, taller, shorter, with different hair or eye color, and so on).

When I asked Lisa to talk to me about her clothing, her jewelry, and her piercings, she had difficulty, as do many clients when I first ask this kind of question, articulating an answer. I asked her to tell me some of the thoughts, images, fantasies and/or daydreams that had occurred to her when she was trying to decide what to wear. This was when she introduced me to Frida Kahlo, an artist she admired tremendously. Much later in our work, Lisa was able to speak more clearly about her identification with Kahlo, and she told me:

I wasn't in physical pain, but I was hurting emotionally, and I couldn't let myself know about it. I think what I admired about her was that she combined softness with strength, delicate feminine patterns with strong, masculine images. She was in such pain, yet she was capable of so much. But she didn't feel that she had to be stoic. She didn't hide her agony. It was a huge part of who she was, and she acknowledged it. No, she did more than that. She revelled in it. Not like a martyr, that's not what I mean. She just showed it to the world, along with other parts of her self, her unhappiness and her beauty, they could all go together.

In our earliest sessions, however, Lisa spoke more simply of the contrasting ways Kahlo presented herself to the world.

She paints herself in these beautiful clothes, but with rods shoved through her body. Even how she dresses is a contrast. Some photographs of her show her as a beautiful woman in traditional Mexican Indian clothing, and others show her dressed like a man. I don't know why, but that's what I think of when I dress. Maybe it's the contrast between my black clothes and my beautiful jewelry, or between earrings, which are pretty, and piercing, which is connected to something primeval and primitive.

As Lisa and I explored her choices, we learned more about her fantasies about Kahlo; and we used these images to put into words many of the unspoken, unformulated internal experiences with which she struggled (see Stern (7); Bromberg (8)). For example, over time we came to understand that Lisa's black clothes and severely groomed hair were her ways of expressing both pain and strength, as well as some deep seated confusion about her own femininity. Her pierced ears and nose were, as she put it, an expression of “femininity and rebellion” which she believed was also one meaning of Kahlo's traditional Indian garb. Lisa imagined that by wearing the embroidered dresses of the Tehuana Indians (see Herrera (10), Kahlo on the one hand complied with her husband's wishes and on the other rebelled against her own mother, who had married a European man and perhaps been ashamed of her own Mexican heritage (although this was Lisa's fantasy and not based, so far as I know, on any known facts about Kahlo's mother). Certainly this daydream of Lisa's captured something significant in her own dynamics,

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including her ongoing tendency to idealize her own father and to denigrate her mother. It also represented Lisa's tremendously ambivalent feelings about her body, which she experienced as both powerful (for example, in its ability to attract men) and painfully vulnerable.

Over time, Lisa raised some fascinating questions about Kahlo, questions that may have no answers, but that were extremely important as we explored the complexity of Lisa's own personality. Was Kahlo a helpless, dependent and depressed woman, married to and living in the shadow of a narcissistic, charming and powerful husband? Or was she a strong, creative and talented woman coping with an almost intolerable set of circumstances with amazing strength and resilience? Recently, an article in the New York Times underscored some of these questions. Describing the relationship between Kahlo and her husband, Diego Rivera, the author notes,

while Rivera's art looked outward, Kahlo's looked inward, reliving the terrible trafic accident that shattered her body in her late teens, recording the pain of her 30 operations, her abortions, miscarriage and inability to bear children, painting her sorrow at Rivera's frequent betrayals (even though she too had many lovers…). Emotionally, though, Rivera needed Kahlo: after they divorced in late 1939, he persuaded her to return, and they remarried 18 months later (1).

Discussing some of the ways in which this remarkable artist engaged with life despite severe and chronic psychological and physical pain, Siltala indicates that many of Kahlo's paintings capture her attempts to rise above an accompanying sense of helplessness and hopelessness. I would add that what may be most compelling about her personality and her art is her willingness and ability to think about and communicate complex, contradictory, painful and potentially disturbing emotions about herself as a woman and a human being. Perhaps her work was a way for her of grappling with and processing the agonies, losses and pleasures of her life. At the end, it may not have been enough to combat the intolerable physical pain and emotional depression; but one of her lasting gifts has been to make visible for others what has not always been tolerated in women's imagery. Kahlo captured some of the powerful, subtle, intricate and often confusing interweaving of psyche and soma in human experience, and put it into pictures for the rest of us to use.

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