Review Contrasting Rene Magritte and Frida Kahlo

Rene Magritte (Belgian, 1898-1967) and Frida Kahlo (Mexican, 1907-1954) could be thought of as Surrealist yin and yang. Breton patronisingly ‘discovered’ Frida, who instead insisted she ‘painted her own reality’ (Burrus, C, 2008) and Rene painted everyone’s reality - with a twist. Magritte’s work was outward looking, external, from his days making wallpaper, to his advertising work, to his paintings, all his work was intended for an audience. To interact with that audience he enjoyed creating puzzles, mysteries and witty visual puns with his work. His aim as he, (and Berger) pointed out, was to paint the impossible as a means to explore reality, and to do so he must break free from the ‘contingent and the coincidental’ (Berger, J, 2001), which is quite against the usual Surrealist aims. Conversely, Frida Kahlo's work was introspective. She made her work for herself, true to her own vision, first and foremost about exploring her own identity. For example as Chadwick points out when talking about The Two Fridas, 1939, painted when she was getting divorced from Rivera, Kahlo uses painting to explore ‘the reality of her own body and her consciousness of that reality; in many cases the reality dissolves into a duality, exterior reality versus interior perception of that reality, or two selves, one loved, the other not.’ (Chadwick, W, 1991). It is interesting then to contrast the two Surrealist-outsiders for similarities as well as differences. As there are so many forms this could take, this review will be limited to looking at self-portraits of the two artists (an important aspect of Kahlo’s work) and their different approaches to use of text (and important aspect to Magritte’s work), from this conclusions can be drawn as to the enduring popularity of both of these important artists.

An obvious difference that jumps out in the respective oeuvres of these two artists is that Magritte is famous for doing almost anything to avoid showing faces, he employed apples, birds, flowers, cloth, to cover faces, and more often than not the male figures in his works are turned away. In contrast, Kahlo takes a long hard look in the mirror, faces her pain and bares all to us, with over a third of her paintings as self-portraits. Freud posited that repetition was a sign of trauma, both artists repeatedly use motifs and symbols, some art historians link Magritte’s tenancy to obscure faces back to 13 year old Magritte’s mother's suicide, in which her face was allegedly covered with her nightgown when she was pulled from the river. Maybe this true, or maybe it is nonsense as he always insisted, perhaps individual faces would only distract the viewer from the real subject of the works? Or perhaps Magritte liked the unsettled affect that not seeing the faces produced. Probably a complex blend of all three. He explained the apple covering his face in the self-portrait The Son of Man, 1964 (fig. 1), as follows: "At least it hides the face partly. Well, so you have the apparent face, the apple, hiding the visible but hidden, the face of the person. It’s something that happens constantly. Everything we see hides another thing, we always want to see what is hidden by what we see. There is an interest in that which is hidden and which the visible does not show us. This interest can take the form of a quite intense feeling, a sort of conflict, one might say, between the visible that is hidden and the visible that is present.” (Torkzeyner, H, 1979). This intense feeling has lead this to be one of his most famous paintings despite being rarely displayed. In this painting the man stands in front of a low wall by the sea (or a large body of water), a recurrent theme despite his hometown being landlocked, water is often associated with the subconscious but perhaps for Rene it would be deeper than that. There are dark clouds gathering. He is directly facing the viewer but with a big floating green apple blocking the view of his face. His eyes are just visible peering around the side of the apple. Another strange detail is the left arm, it appears to be on backwards, i.e. that arm is from a man facing the sea. Perhaps he is showing us a duality, facing back and forwards. Some critics have speculated that he is comparing himself to Jesus, with the title, Son of Man, and the biblical association of the apple. He is known for hating symbols and rejecting organised religion so I suspect that is not the case, both the apple and bowler hatted men are recurrent motifs in Magritte work, it’s more likely that son of man refers to the generic nature of his figure, all men. He revisits the imagery in several paintings that year none of which have a religious title, with the series La Grande Guerre and The Taste of the Invisible.
Kahlo also was accused of Christ-like connotations, with the thorn necklace featured piercing her neck in, *Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird, 1940* (fig. 2) which are likely to reflect the pain she was feeling over the separation from Diego. Like Magritte’s figure, she is directly confronting the viewer in a shallow picture plane. Dressed in white, presenting as a Christian martyr or Aztec sacrifice, with her pet monkey on her right shoulder (said to represent Diago because he gave it as a present, alternatively, symbolising evil in Mexican culture). It’s not clear whether he is pulling the thorns tighter or trying to get them off. Over her left shoulder is a black panther ready to pounce (said to symbolise death or bad luck in Mexican culture). The thorns look as though they grew in from below to strangle her. Dangling from this deadly necklace is a hummingbird (which looks to be dead). This is a lucky love charm in Mexico, but also the symbol for the Aztec god of war, Huitzilopochtli. Aztecs believed human sacrifices and dead warriors would be reincarnated as hummingbirds. The shape of both the hummingbird and the infinity, figure of eight pattern of her hair braid compositionally mirror her famous unibrow. As with the Magritte, this painting has very little spatial depth, ie little to no middle-ground. With the two creatures either side of her on the same plane of the painting, the composition is almost that of a cross, circling back to Jesus and the resurrection. The background is a selection of lush green jungle looking leaves, perhaps as a fertile counterbalance to the negative symbols in the foreground. Art historian Chadwick points out that vegetation (or its deficit) as a metaphor for psychic reality, so despite the thorns she is hopeful. Butterflies in Christianity represent the resurrection too, dragonflies are also very positive symbols so those on her hair add to the optimism of the painting in the face of her past.

Magritte was fascinated with language, and often exploited the duality, the conflict of painted visual language with written language to produce a paradox. In *The Treachery of Images, 1929* (fig. 3) he painted a realistic picture of a pipe with the words, ‘*ceci n’est pas une pipe*’, this is not a pipe, underneath. As Berger points out ‘*he made two languages (the visual and the verbal) cancel one another out.*’ (Berger, J, 2001). The statement is true and not true at the same time. Obviously it is a pipe, but Magritte is questioning the actuality of objects and illusion of paintings because you cannot stuff the picture with tobacco to smoke it so it cannot be an actual pipe. This style of impossible intellectual line of inquiry fit right in with the very theoretical Surrealists.
Fig 3: Rene Magritte - La Trahison des images (Ceci n'est pas une pipe) (The treachery of images (This is not a pipe)), 1948, Oil on Canvas, Private Collection

Fig. 4 Frida Kahlo - El suicidio de Dorothy Hale (The Suicide of Dorothy Hale), 1939, Oil on Masonite with painted frame, Collection Phoenix Art Museum, Gift of an anonymous donor
Kahlo too often incorporated text on her images, but in support of, rather than against the image, often in a scroll like section at the bottom as is found on the Mexican *Retablos* or *Ex-Votos* she collected. These small colourful paintings on cheap easily available tin sheets, by self-taught devotees, thank God for answering a prayer, often for healing. They usually included a scene depicting a tragic event or sick person and a Saint intervening to save them. Interestingly Kahlo's do not seem very thankful, she subverts the medium by depicting events where no miracle has happened, for example in her commissioned work, *The Suicide of Dorothy Hale*, 1938-39 (fig. 4) where the actress plummeted to her death. Unlike Magritte, Kahlo was uninterested in a witty dialogue with the intended audience and uncompromising when it came to committing her vision. The patron, Clare Boothe Luce, who commissioned this portrait of her friend said she ‘felt sick’ (Bauer, C, 2007) when she pulled it out of the crate.

![Fig 5 Frida Kahlo - My Birth, 1932, Oil on metal, 30.5 x 35 cm, Private Collection of Madonna.](image)

As with Magritte, Kahlo sometimes made use of the absence of something expected to make a point. For example, in *My Birth*, 1932 (Fig. 5), she leaves the scroll of expected text at the bottom blank. She literally has no words. This was painted around the time she had one of her traumatic miscarriages (explored in *Henry Ford Hospital*, 1932) and her mother died of cancer in quick succession. It is a very unconventional view from the front of how Frida imagines her birth. Art historian Castro-Sethness established that the Aztec sculpture of the goddess Tlazolteotl which graphically depicts birth from an upright position would have
provided inspiration. Her mother’s upper body and head is covered with a sheet which could be a shroud and a painting of the Virgin looks onto the scene weeping. When commenting on her decision to paint on metal, or Masonite, Berger in his book on portraits, sees more than just incorporation of traditional Mexican retablo, he posits that it adversely affects her vision not to paint on a surface that is ‘as smooth as skin’, something that can only be noticed when viewing the original works. ‘The sensitivity of her own mutilated body made her aware of the skin of everything alive - trees, fruit, water, birds, and naturally other women and men. And so, in painting her own image, as if on her own skin, she speaks of the whole sentient world.’ (Berger, J, 2015).

There are many other interesting points which could be discussed, and have been many times, when comparing these two artists, the importance of Frida’s work from a feminist perspective with regard to the well documented male surrealist views on women for example. The different ways in which both artists evoke our other senses with their work, sound, touch etc, other than the visual. However, as this short introductory review demonstrates, their works, although very different, both reach out to the collective public psyche as mysteries to unravel. Magritte’s deliberately and obvious delight in obscuring meaning and Kahlo’s complex use of personal and indigenous symbols and references. It could be that the true meaning of either of them can never be fully unravelled. Magritte’s work appeals to our heads whilst Kahlo’s appeals to our hearts. As ‘our idea of freedom extends, our experience of it diminishes. [...] There is such a thing as a reduction, not to absurdity, but to freedom. Magritte’s best, most eloquent, paintings are about this reduction’. (Berger, J, 2001). Berger also summed up magnificently on Frida with the following ‘That she became a world legend is in part due to the fact that in the dark age in which we are living under the new world order, the sharing of pain is one of the essential preconditions for a refinding a dignity and hope.’ (Berger, J, 2015).
References:


