

Warren Carter - Frida Kahlo, Self Portrait along the Border Line between Mexico and the USA

WARREN CARTER: My name is Warren Carter, and I'm a lecturer in the History of Art Department at The Open University. My current research interests are around arts and politics in Mexico in the period after the revolution of 1910 to 1920. And in particular, the murals of Diego Rivera. It was these murals that brought Rivera to the attention of North American patrons, who then paid for him to go north of the border to paint murals in their corporate headquarters.

Yet today, I want to look at a painting by Rivera's wife, Frida Kahlo. In particular, *Self-portrait on the borderline between Mexico and the United States*. What becomes apparent is that whilst Rivera used his trip to the United States to produce murals which celebrated North American industry, Kahlo by contrast, produced small-scale intimate paintings, which clearly problematized a relationship between Mexico and the United States. Kahlo is renowned for wearing traditional Mexican indigenous dress, yet in the painting, she is wearing a colonial period pink dress more associated with North America. She is also wearing a pre-Colombian necklace, and in her left hand, she holds the national flag. In her right, a cigarette.

To her left is Mexico, with an Aztec pyramid. Below this, there is a pile of rubble and two female sculptures made of clay and a carved skull. The plants and flowers in the foreground have their roots embedded in the earth and link the Mexican landscape to the North American one to the right. In the process of moving from one to the other, the roots turn into electrical cables, that power a loudspeaker, a searchlight, and a generator in the foreground.

Above these, there are repeated series of industrial air conditioning ducts that stand in front of a factory on the left and skyscrapers on the right. Smoke is billowing out from the four chimneys on the factory, which blurs the United States flag that is painted in the sky above.

Kahlo and Rivera went to America in the early 1930s, when Mexico was an object of fascination for many North American intellectuals. Indeed, the decade was bookended by two major shows on Mexican art and culture at the Metropolitan Museum in 1930 and the Museum of Modern Art in 1940, both in New York. Many North Americans idealised the Mexican economy, especially after the revolution of 1910 to 1920. And they saw it as a pre-industrial utopia, the opposite to North America, which had crashed and burned so spectacularly after the Wall Street Crash of 1929.

It is easy to read the set of oppositions in the painting which fed into a primitivizing mythology in the minds of many North American intellectuals in the period in question. Nature vs. manufacture, humanity vs. mechanisation, magic vs. science, life vs. death, pleasure vs. work, dream vs. reality, et cetera. This opposition between an archaic pre-Colombian Mexico and an impersonal full factory modernity is importantly inscribed within the figure of the artist herself, colonial dress and indigenous necklace, the Mexican flag and the modern, by association, Western cigarette.

The figure of the artist on the border is thereby depicted as a hybrid product of both Mexico and North America. The roots of the Mexican plants that turn into electrical cables across the border suggest an important link between the two countries, and perhaps, even, an interdependency. Yet the prognosis of both seems inauspicious. Locked as they are into either cultural decline or a bankrupt modernity.

In this way, Kahlo used small-scale self-portraiture to explore herself and her colonised cultural roots. Rivera may have produced a mural in Detroit, which dramatises the effects of North American imperialism in Mexican politics. Yet it is to Kahlo's credit that she shows us what imperialism looks like once it has been internalised.

Kahlo's painting also has a more contemporary relevance, in that the border between Mexico and the United States was put under a vivid spotlight with the election of Donald Trump in November 2016. Now, when Kahlo and Rivera visited Detroit, the city was still reeling from the effects of the Wall Street Crash of 1929, and mired in the Great Depression. Mexicans were the first to suffer, often being put onto freight trains and taken back forcefully across the border and repatriated.

This focus upon immigration across the border between Mexico and the United States became a key plank of Trump's election campaign. A survey in 2015 found that 58% of North Americans thought Latinos were a problem for American society, and Trump went for their vote. Notoriously promising to build a wall between the two countries to prevent immigration if he was elected.

It is no small irony that during Trump's presidential campaign, Kahlo's Self-portrait on the borderline between Mexico and the United States travelled from its private collection in New York to the Philadelphia Museum of Art for the exhibition on Mexican modernism from 1920 to 1950. Or that for the promotional material, a cropped image of Frida was used for the poster, as well as the online materials. Kahlo's *Self-portrait on the borderline between Mexico and the United States* dramatises this relationship between the two countries, when yet again, it was at an all-time low.

[Please note: "North America" is largely used here to refer to the United States of America and Anglo-America; Mexico is indeed part of North America]