Analysis:
Frida Kahlo, *What the Water Gave Me*, 1938

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Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) was an innovative Mexican artist, whose work was shaped by her short but extraordinary life. *What The Water Gave Me* embodies the way in which, as with many of her other paintings, Kahlo captured her own reality and confronted her social, cultural and political position. *What the Water Gave Me* was painted in 1938, Kahlo using thinly applied layers of oil paint onto the canvas. Sometimes referred to as *What I Saw in the Water*, the painting is 91 x 70.5 cm in dimension and now lies in Daniel Filipacchi’s private collection. Originally painted in Mexico, the piece was exhibited in Paris in January 1939, by the leading Surrealist Andre Breton. Before being sold, it was returned to Mexico; Kahlo signed and dated it 1939 despite completing it the year before. The history of this work’s movement from Mexico to a private collection is allusive, but *What the Water Gave Me* has appeared in several exhibitions, during and after Kahlo’s death. The most recent exhibition was at the Guggenheim in New York in 1996, where Filipacchi’s collection formed part of the show *Surrealism: Two Private Eyes, the Nesuhi Ertegun and Daniel Filipacchi Collections*. Kahlo’s work continues to be analysed in an attempt to understand the meaning and influences behind her self expressive art.

Kahlo developed a powerful and distinct style and this translates to *What the Water Gave Me*. Her usual linear style is adopted and the defined technique of the imagery contrasts to the seemingly scattered composition of these elements. The overall transparent grey-blue tonality is enhanced by areas of vibrant colour and darker tones such as in the red and yellow of the floating Tehuana Indian dress which creates a distinction with the visually light space of the bath. In her diary, ‘amongst the meditative or nightmarish illustration’, Kahlo presents her

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own colour palette. For instance, yellow represents sickness and fear, while also resembling part of the sun and of joy. A more greenish yellow shows madness and mystery, while dark green is the ‘colour of bad news and good business’\(^2\). This unique portrayal of colour adds to the powerful visuals and also to the ambiguity of Kahlo’s metaphors.

The Empire State building is recognisable in the piece and sits in the middle of an apparently erupting volcano. The volcano is on an island of earth which also holds other imagery, such as a skeleton and a dead bird impaled by the branches of a tree. To the left of the image a ship appears to be sailing through the water, its path disturbed by a group of rocks. The build up of all of these elements serves to unify the composition and demonstrates Kahlo’s visual symbolism; the forms do merge together but there is still an aspect of refinement and structure to the piece. Recession and depth is shown by the varying tones and also by the way the legs and feet are placed in the bath. A perspective is created through the juxtapositions of imagery contained in the water and by the vantage point that it is viewed from. The perspective however is deliberately not supported by the scale or proportion of each of the elements, evident in the size of the bird compared to the tree and the flowers compared to the dress.

Although the main body of elements are kept with the confinements of the water’s surface, the open form of this painting is apparent as the full structure of the bath cannot be seen. The space at the top of the canvas implies the bath is placed within a setting that goes beyond the viewers eye. Symmetry within the composition is created by the feet, legs and the central

position of the bath in the frame; again, like the recession and scale, the chaotic forms on the surface of the water, pose to break this underlying symmetry. The symmetrical structure is directly linked to the double meanings in Kahlo’s work.

Unlike many of Kahlo’s other work, in *What the Water Gave Me* there is no dominant central focus; the traumas that Kahlo had endured are presented in an intimate, yet disturbing way. Her personal pain, such as her broken childhood and the volatile relationship with her husband Diego Rivera, is visualised through the scattered sets of opposites. The deformed and bloodied right foot contrasts to the left, not only depicting Kahlo’s one of many injuries that she suffered in a bus accident in 1925, but also representing universal binaries such as body and mind, male and female. When recollecting the incident in her diary, Kahlo talks about how she ‘came to climb onto that bus that destroyed me’ ³, later writing how her recovery ‘would be slow with a lot of massage and hot water baths’ ⁴. The wounded foot is also a direct reference to later operations and the constant physical sufferings that she experienced throughout her life.

Other images such as the naked female floating dead on the waters’ surface with a rope lassoed round her neck, the dead bird and the skeleton shows Kahlo’s fascination between life and death, comfort and lost and her own battle to survive. Her parents are the only recognisable figures in this painting, a recurring motif transposed from their wedding photograph also shown in *My Grandparents, My Parents and I*. Her use of visual metaphors

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⁴ Ibid, 46
draws outside influence from Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516). Kahlo merged Bosch’s symbolism and compositions with her own imagery of her Self, this piece in particular becoming a ‘Bosch-like world of physical and psychological associations’\(^5\). The grotesque nature of much of Kahlo’s imagery also shows further impact from the silent expressionist horror films that Kahlo was interested in during the 1920’s and 1930’s.

*What the Water Gave Me* shows a re-visioning of the perception of the female bather. Kahlo confronts the idea of the female body always being seen as an object of the male gaze and instead presents the female bather as ‘both the object and subject of her own gaze’\(^6\). The perspective that is offered to the viewer is unlike any other depictions of the female body and this perspective is enhanced by the imagery that is placed in the water. Many of the elements within the piece have sexual connotations. The plant that sits towards the upper leg has buds that resembles labia and has roots that resembles pubic hair. The main part of the flower can also be viewed as a bleeding vaginal wound, presenting Kahlo’s own connection between her sexual experiences and pain. The shell, traditionally a symbol in Mexico and Latin America of fertility, is depicted broken and punctured relating to Kahlo’s infertility. The two naked woman that lie on the sponge reveals Kahlo’s own sexual experiences, writer Robin Richmond stating it becomes a direct reference to the ‘physical love for her own sex’\(^7\). Throughout her marriage, Kahlo had many affairs, both with men and women and her sexuality and relationships is something that she has dared to expose.


There is an overwhelming dreamlike quality to this work and the juxtaposition of her realities has caused this piece and Kahlo’s work to be seen as Surrealist Art. Andre Breton described the work as an ‘example of pure surrealism’; Kahlo herself acknowledged the relationship her art had with Surrealism but deliberately maintained an ambiguous position towards it. Despite the distance Kahlo created, her continued focus on pain and the underlying aspects of eroticism continues her work to be associated with Surrealism.

The repressed traumas of Kahlo’s unconscious have been a catalyst for this painting and contains elements that link with her ‘Childhood Series’. Kahlo has indicated that *What the Water Gave Me* was partly influenced by the childhood games she used to play in the bath, and the ‘dreams she had about them’. The surface filled with inter-connected imagery and the further complications caused by elements such the double reflections of the feet, all constitute to the dreamlike characteristic. ___ expands on this stating “dream imagery is created out of conflicting desires and is often simultaneously attractive and repulsive”. Kahlo reconstructed her childhood dreams into the expression of her constant physical and physiological pain.

Her relation to both Surrealism and her Mexican culture is important in *What the Water Gave Me*. In the press release for a show at The Julien Levy Gallery in 1920, it was described that

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Kahlo’s paintings combined a ‘native Mexican quality which is naive, an unusual, female frankness, and intimacy, and a sophistication which is the Surrealist element’\textsuperscript{11}. The International Exhibition of Surrealism marked a wider crossover between Mexico and Surrealist Art in Europe. Mexico, at first was not initially receptive, but it did fuel the development of ‘fantastic realism’ during the 1940’s. Although What the Water Gave Me did not feature in the ‘International Exhibition of Surrealism’, this piece more than any other marks the pivotal change in which, after 1938, her work became more complex, ‘more penetrating, more disturbingly intense’\textsuperscript{12}.

Her links with Surrealism gradually meant Kahlo began to prove herself as a significant artist in her own right, no longer over shadowed by her husband. Rivera was a prominent figure in Mexican and Mural art. As with Rivera’s murals, Frida’s paintings and much of Mexican art like retablos, ‘interweave fact and fantasy’\textsuperscript{13}. Retablos are small devotional oil paintings, based on folk and Catholic church art; Kahlo adapted the retablo tradition to introduce her own personal battles and spiritual beliefs. The influences from both her Mexican identity and from her husband remains apparent long after 1938 when ‘What the Water Gave Me’ was painted. From 1922 and 1953, Rivera painted Murals not only in Mexico, but internationally in the rest of Europe and also in America. In Self Portrait on the Borderline of Mexico and the United States, Kahlo portrays herself as being between these two countries. The Empire State building sitting on an imitation of the Mexican landscape in Water the Water Gave Me

\textsuperscript{11} Hayden Herrera, Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo, (London: Bloomsbury, 1989), 230
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, 256
\textsuperscript{13} Hayden Herrera, Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo, (London: Bloomsbury, 1989), 261
shows Kahlo’s recognition of the cross cultural union that impacted both her and Rivera’s life and their individual careers.

*What the Water Gave Me* is an extremely powerful piece that embodies how much of an influential artist Kahlo was, and still is today. Her projected anguish that is seen relates to all aspects of her past. She has boldly explored not only her own fragmented body but the female body as Self, and how the body is perceived in Western culture. Kahlo’s life is extremely well documented and much interpretation is given on the meaning of *What the Water Gave Me*. The painting has been in Filipacchi’s private collection for over two decades, and despite its limited accessibility to the public, it is such a vital piece in showing the development of Kahlo’s thoughts, responses as well as her growing technique and skill as a painter. *What the Water Gave Me* is such an honest and reflective portrayal of Kahlo life and combined with her chaotic yet structured composition and perspective she succeeds in disturbing and directly confronting the viewer with both imagination and reality.

**Bibliography**


Films:
