

Analytical Profile

Inside the Flow of Kahlo

As she laid in there bedridden, a thought came to her. It was then that she requested some paint, a brush, and a canvas. The ache in her back and the hollow in her lower belly groaned in pain beneath the wrappings of the bandages. She moved stiffly, uncomfortable with a large cast around her torso, restricting her movement. Her request for art supplies arrived and was given the canvas to use, she waited, she thought, and began to paint. She painted a story about herself. A simple portrait can say so much, even if it shows so little. She filled the painting with what she felt, she filled it with thoughts of herself and how she viewed her life. Many saw her work as “emotionally raw and visually disturbing” (Beaver, 2017). Frida Kahlo, artist and activist, wanted nothing but to paint, and wanted nothing but to give.

Frida Kahlo was a famous painter known throughout the early 20th century. She was born in July 6th, 1907 with the name Magdalena Carmen Frida Kahlo y Calderón in Coyoacán, Mexico City, Mexico. Her parents were Matilde Calderón y González and Guillermo Kahlo. When she was six years old she had polio. After she recovered, her father encouraged her to be more involved in sports such as swimming, wrestling, and boxing. As a child, she enjoyed working with her father in his photography studio, which influenced Kahlo’s creative background (Beaver, 2017). In her teen years, she was enrolled in an elite preparatory school, where she learned subjects like biology and anatomy which piqued her interest in becoming a doctor. During this time, she met Diego Rivera, a famous muralist. There, he was requested to paint a mural for the school. Though, an unfortunate event occurred as she was riding a bus with her boyfriend, Alejandro Gomez Arias at to return home. A trolley smashed into the bus and a

handrail pierced her body, through her pelvis (“Frida Kahlo Biography”, n.d.). That moment where she laid in her bed, unmovable and in pain, this was when she began to paint. Afterwards, she endured many years of pain which she portrayed in most of her work.

Frida Kahlo was an activist, feminist, and communist. Kahlo believed in an autonomous government with democracy as its center. She fought for what was right and went against female stereotypes. She had bushy brows and a mustache, which she thought were fitting for her identity and made her more beautiful. She then married the famous muralist Diego Rivera. Both drastically different people, their marriage was, to put it lightly, not the most romantic. Due to many disagreements and infidelities, they spent most of their time separate. As she grew older and into her late forties, she grew weaker and died at age 47 from “pulmonary embolism” although others speculate that it was suicide (“Frida Kahlo Biography”, n.d.).

Frida Kahlo once said, “My painting carries with it the message of pain.” It was from all this pain that stemmed her artistic and creative nature. In her paintings, she demanded to be heard, she wanted to convey a story that was essentially about her own life and self. She denied the label “surrealist painter” because she believed that what she painted was not that of dreams but from reality. For example, there is painting called *The Broken Column*. In the portrait, she’s naked from the waist up, covering her from the waist down. She has nails stuck into her skin, all over her torso and right where her spine is supposed to be, there is a column instead where her skin sort of split open. The only thing keeping her upright in the painting is a torso brace. The column looks like it is ready to break and there are visible cracks on the column. There are tears streaming down her face, but she is looking straight ahead. This portrait conveys strength. Although it looks like she’s going to break, she is still holding herself up (“Frida Kahlo:

Paintings, Biographies, Quotes,” 2011). Another example is *The Two Fridas*. She created this painting after her divorce with Diego Rivera. The painting shows two Frida Kahlo’s sitting next to each other, one with a “Tehuana costume” and another in a more modern dress. The one with the traditional costume has a broken heart while the other Kahlo’s heart is still intact. Both Kahlo’s are shown holding hands with the two visible hearts connected but the broken heart risks major blood loss. The painting expresses how lonely she was after the divorce with Diego Rivera (“Frida Kahlo: Paintings, Biographies, Quotes,” 2011). She evokes a story out of every painting. Like a writer, she uses detailed images to describe what is happening in her life, in her head, and in her heart. Everything is a collision between what she knew, what is heard, and what will be said. Her paintings are not random motifs or simple lectures about life, they are an explanation of events, an articulate history about one’s journey to knowing themselves.

Frida Kahlo’s work is a reflection of what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has written in his books *Flow* and *Creativity*. Csikszentmihalyi explains the “autotelic experience” and how it affects those experiencing it, “what differs [for that person is that they pay] attention to the activity [of painting] for its own sake” and that is exactly how Frida Kahlo paints (2009, p. 69). She does not paint for anyone else but herself, and she does not paint because she has to or suffer from any consequences. She paints because painting is a reflection of herself. It is a telling of who she is, a self discovery, in which Csikszentmihalyi talks about as well. This form of self discovery gave Kahlo solace and she embraced every moment in which her painting spoke so much about herself. She wanted to convey something from every piece she painted, not just to show to others but to remind herself of the life she had witnessed. She always did things for herself, not caring what others thought, becoming the epitome of feminism. Though, at the same

time, did things for others as well, which explains her interest in politics, her involvement in the communist party and righteous activism, which Csikszentmihalyi would think of as “exotelic” (2009, p. 69).

According to Csikszentmihalyi, the “autotelic experience” is the same as “flow” and that “flow activities are the same as “enjoyable activities” (2009, p. 70). In *Flow*, he said, “Alienation gives way to involvement, enjoyment replaces boredom, helplessness turns into a feeling of control and psychic energy works to reinforce the sense of self,” and this reflects Kahlo’s life exactly (2009, p. 69). Right after her accident, the bedridden Frida Kahlo followed what Csikszentmihalyi said previously, and for this very reason and chain of thought, she painted. Also, Csikszentmihalyi is correct in how some creative people work and it is mirrored in Kahlo’s marriage. Her and Diego Rivera led very separate lives, so even though they were together, they worked independently. Another matter is how in *Creativity*, Csikszentmihalyi explains the definition of creativity and how one sees it as talent while another sees it as genius. However, what he brought up to point is how it can be either or, or none (2013, p. 27). This point is brought to light on Frida Kahlo’s own life, she was not deemed a genius nor was she thought to have talent. She was revered later in life and more so after death.

Frida Kahlo, was an outspoken artist, activist and feminist, a divine hero, and a passionate lover. She demanded to be heard and so therefore her voice bellowed and echoed to all of those with big enough hearts to listen. Creativity and flow is not that of simple act and consequence, it is that of experience and pure enjoyment. She was indeed, unlike most, ahead of her time.

Works Cited

- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. (2009). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York, NY: Harpercollins.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. (2013). *Creativity: The Psychology of Discovery and Invention*. New York, NY: Harpercollins.
- Tuchman, Phyllis. "Frida Kahlo." *Smithsonian.com*. Smithsonian Institution, Nov. 2002. Web. 16 Jan. 2017. <<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/frida-kahlo-70745811/?page=1>>
- Beaver, Katlyn. "Frida Kahlo." *TheArtStory.org*. The Art Story: Modern Art Insight, 2017. Web. 16 Jan. 2017. <<http://www.theartstory.org/artist-kahlo-frida.htm>>
- "Frida Kahlo Biography." *Biography.com*. A&E Television Networks, n.d. Web. 16 Jan. 2017. <<http://www.biography.com/people/frida-kahlo-9359496#related-video-gallery>>
- "Frida Kahlo: Paintings, Biographies, Quotes." *Fridakahlo.org*. Frida Kahlo: Paintings, Biographies, Quotes, 2011. Web. 19 Jan. 2017. <<http://www.fridakahlo.org/the-broken-column.jsp>>

Analytical Profile

An Expression of Pop Culture

When I was around ten years old, my mom took me to an art museum. She told me we were going to see an exhibit for a famous artist whose name I had not heard. At my age, I was only familiar with single pieces by the most famous artists: Da Vinci, Van Gogh, and Picasso. As we entered the exhibit, I was barraged with a multitude of bright colors and repeating figures. Initially overwhelmed, I began to notice notable images, the few I can remember being Campbell's soup cans, Marilyn Monroe, and Elvis Presley. The artist was Andy Warhol. In the 1960s and 1970s, Andy Warhol became known as one of the pioneers of the Pop Art movement. His art focused on consumerism, celebrity, and pop culture as a whole. Through his work, he managed to criticize while embracing these elements.

Andy Warhol experimented with many different techniques that originated in his background as a commercial artist. In this career, he was "trained them in the visual vocabulary of mass culture as well as the techniques to seamlessly merge the realms of high art and popular culture" (Wolf). In 1952, Warhol made his debut as a serious artist and began to have his own exhibitions. His pieces started to draw more influences from pop culture by 1960 as he began to integrate advertisements and comic strips in his work. His work in early 1961 was painterly; he would project images onto large-scale canvases and freehand with paint. Later that year, Warhol began his iconic Campbell's Soup Can paintings. He employed some similar techniques in this collection such as using a projector, but used pencil to outline a pre-made stencil before painting. These techniques were common tricks of the trade for a commercial artist. His work began to take away the distinct brushstrokes of abstract expressionism, and more towards removing the hand of the artist. This can especially be seen in his adoption of the use of silkscreens for his

work in 1962. This technique further took away traces of the artist's hand, and allowed for mass reproduction of a single image.

In 1964, Warhol hired several assistants to help him in his studio that he named "The Factory," teasing this idea of mass produced art ("Andy Warhol Biography, Art, and Analysis of Works"). Much of this mass production of repeating images imitated the way advertisers barrage the public with images of their product. Warhol did the same thing with the *Campbell's Soup Can* paintings, but by putting each image side-by-side, he was being honest with his intentions. Despite his transparency, he also made the images visually captivating, simultaneously condemning and appealing to the notion that consumerism brings happiness. That is the genius in his work. However, painting the same image over and over was boring to Warhol. Because of this he introduced "small variations into the package, to render the last product a little obsolete" (Hughes). Through this, he was able to maintain his flow as postulated by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, so he was pushed to a higher levels of performance and creativity ("Flow" 74). Warhol's repetition in his work could have caused him to steer into complete boredom, but he experimented with new techniques just enough to keep the creative juices going.

Much of Andy Warhol's work puts a critical eye on media and celebrity culture. His lifelong fascination with pop culture was cultivated in his childhood. Growing up in Pittsburgh, Warhol had a nervous disorder that kept him at home for long periods of time. He kept himself entertained through the radio and collecting movie star photographs ("Andy Warhol Biography, Art, and Analysis of Works"). His photograph collection may have later influenced his famous portraits of Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor. Warhol had particular skill in a portraitist with his screen-printing technique. He would take Polaroid photos of subject, and had the chance to

close the most flattering photo for his silkscreen. Much of the detail of the photograph was converted to monochrome. The silkscreen was transferred over to a colored background created from using a wide-loaded brush (Hughes). After Marilyn Monroe's death in 1962, Warhol managed to obtain one of her publicity photos and created multiple images with this photograph with the only difference being the background color ("Andy Warhol Biography, Art, and Analysis of Works"). Warhol was emulating the media, who reprinted her image so much she became elevated to an idol-like status. Under the press's attention, Monroe's death became tragically beautiful, rather than the reality of drug abuse and years of depression. Therefore, this culmination of pieces examined how media saturation causes disassociation between ourselves and actual events.

Despite Warhol's fame, it is not well known that he grew up and remained a devout Catholic who went to mass regularly ("Andy Warhol Biography, Art, and Analysis of Works"). This religious upbringing influenced much of his art. In his piece Gold Marilyn Monroe he uses gold leaf around the face of Marilyn Monroe, mimicking that of religious Byzantine art (Hughes). Through this technique, he parodies the image of the Madonna that would have been heavily present throughout his childhood. By presenting Monroe in this way, it examines the way that people worship celebrities as much as their religious ideology. After her death the coverage and subsequent obsession with Monroe elevated her into being a divine figure. Similar ideas are displayed much more prominently in his later work, such as The Last Supper. Based on the masterpiece of the same name by Leonardo da Vinci, Warhol converted the apostles to black and white, superimposed logos over their faces, and broke different parts of the scene apart. He produced over one hundred of these pieces ("Andy Warhol Biography, Art, and Analysis of

Works"). In these images, Warhol remained respectful of the original artwork and his own religion, while also showing that nothing is sacred to pop culture.

Warhol was not necessarily much different than the other artists in the Pop Art movement. Most of the artists in the movement, like him, began their careers as commercial artists before going on to create their own art. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi states "that the creative person isn't necessarily different from anyone else" (*Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* 28). One might contemplate that Warhol was simply at the right place at the right time. There is truth in this consideration, as creative minds must be aided by a society that validates them, but it ignores the whole story. Csikszentmihalyi writes that "the trait of personal creativity may help generate the novelty that will change a domain" (*Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* 29). While Warhol might not have had the level of success for his style of art in another time period, it does not diminish that fact that he expanded the domain of his concentration, increased opportunities for pop artists, and broadened the scope of the art world.

This last summer, I had the opportunity to see Warhol's art again in the Detroit Institute of Arts. It was not an actress, a container, or even a political or religious figure, but rather a silkscreen self-portrait. I feel as though Andy Warhol truly understood pop culture, especially because he acknowledged and embraced that he was a part of it too. His work really demonstrates the understanding that in his critique of pop culture and consumerism, he too, is promoting it. The integration of these competing ideas into a collection of vastly varying pieces over his lifetime truly is creative.

Works Cited

- "Andy Warhol Biography, Art, and Analysis of Works." *The Art Story*. The Art Story Contributors, 2017. Web. 17 Jan. 2017.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*. New York: HarperCollins, 1996. Print.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. "Flow." *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper & Row, 1990. 71-93. Print.
- Hughes, Robert. "The Rise of Andy Warhol." Editorial. *New York Review of Books* 18 Feb. 1982: n. pag. *The New York Review of Books*. Web. 17 Jan. 2017.
- Wolf, Justin. "Pop Art Movement, Artists and Major Works." *The Art Story*. The Art Story Contributors, 2017. Web. 17 Jan. 2017.