

“Agonized Poetry”: Catharsis in Frida Kahlo’s “Miscarriage in Detroit.”

Jen Westmoreland Bouchard

After suffering a major miscarriage in Detroit in 1932, Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) created one of her most revealing and disturbing self-portraits, “Miscarriage in Detroit.” If you’ve seen Julie Taymor and Salma Hayek’s masterful depiction of Frida’s life in the 2002 film, *Frida*, it’s difficult to wipe away the image of Frida, lying palid and frail in her hospital bed, staring at her disfigured fetus in a jar of formaldehyde. In this scene, Frida paints to memorialize. She also paints to heal. If you’re familiar with Frida’s colorful biography (including her life-threatening bus accident, the resulting chronic pain, and the betrayal of her husband, Diego Rivera), it is not a stretch to imagine that this painting is about more kinds of loss than uniquely that of her unborn child. In her journal, Frida wrote: “...I paint my own reality. The only thing I know is that I paint because I need to, and I paint whatever passes through my head without any consideration...My painting carries with it the message of pain...Painting completed my life...I believe that work is the best thing.”

In response to “Miscarriage in Detroit,” her husband, the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, commented that this was one in a series of “masterpieces which had exalted the feminine quality of truth, reality, cruelty and suffering. Never before had awomen put such agonized poetry on canvas as Frida did at this time in Detroit.” (www.artchive.com/artchive/K/kahlo.html). Before seeing the actual painting this year, I had collected reprinted versions in several books. It moved me in such a profound way that I even purchased a reproduction to hang in my office. Needless to say, for years I have enjoyed the painting for its deeply emotional impact and its rare aesthetic qualities. In the past, the emotion I had experienced while viewing the painting was derived from the intensely intimate relationship of the artist to the subject matter. In other words, my feelings of sorrow were for Frida, a mournful would-be mother.

On a sunny Saturday afternoon, I drove to the Walker Art Center to see the 2007 Frida retrospective, hoping to catch a glimpse of this work and some of my other favorite Kahlo oeuvres. Apparently half of the inhabitants of Minnesota shared my plan. After waiting for nearly an hour to enter the show, I was herded in with a sweaty mass of art students, suburban socialites, and art affectionados. As I rounded the bend into the gallery, the energy of the room seemed to suck me into “Miscarriage in Detroit.” The

other masterpieces blurred into the background and, though I attempted to force myself to read the articulate biography of Frida on the adjacent wall, my eyes continued to drift back to the small canvas of “Miscarriage.” For the first time in my relationship with this painting, my viewing was no longer restricted to the artist/painting dynamic. I was completely drawn into the experience of the painting. My heart pounded and my eyes welled up. I began to grieve for lost opportunities, deceased family and friends, failed projects and relationships, unspoken words. Though I was almost completely lost in this emotional wave, I do remember feeling confused. I had never miscarried, so why should this painting feel so real to me, so applicable to my life? Lost in the recesses of my memory, I barely noticed the salt-water rivers streaming down my cheeks. “Excuse me, are you okay?” I turned around and my gaze locked with the concerned eyes of a security guard. Embarrassed, I assured him that I was fine. And I was. As I left the museum, I felt unburdened. I drove home with a new sense of purpose and a healthy dose of creative energy.

In the intense world of commitments, schedules and expectations in which we live, we rarely allow ourselves to grieve. I had pushed all of these events into my long-term memory and covered them with work obligations, travel and new friendships. Like many women, I had become caught up in the daily rituals associated with attending to my marriage, my home, and my career. I had begun to exist on a certain emotional level that allowed me to complete quotidian tasks without much introspection. Unbeknownst to me, I needed to experience Frida’s intensely personal portrait in order to live more fully in my own life.

During my drive home from the museum, I thought about my “conversation” with Frida’s painting. As I searched for the right term, “catharsis” came to mind. Most of us are familiar with the Ancient Greek concept of “catharsis,” or a process of cleansing. Aristotle was the first scholar to link the notion of catharsis to the arts. In *Politics*, his discussion of catharsis gestures to the notion that catharsis is located in the theatrical work itself. The *action* taking place in the work produces an emotional *reaction* in the audience or viewer. In this context, catharsis only occurs when both elements (work and viewer) are present. Therefore, the potential for catharsis is always present in the psyche of the viewer, but it is “tapped” or catalyzed by the work of art. This seemed like a satisfactory way of explaining my experience, but I yearned for a more specific definition of catharsis, one that encompassed visual art as well. I revisited a 1925 article by Vygotsky entitled “Art as Catharsis.” Vygotsky explains “that artistic enjoyment is not pure perception, but that it requires the highest psychic

activity. Artistic emotions are not collected by the psyche as if they were a handful of seeds thrown into a bag. They require a process of germination and growth." (www.marxists.org/archive/vygotsky/works/1925/ch09.htm)

This idea of germinating resonated with my experience at the Frida exhibition. I had ‘lived’ with this painting in my psyche for years. When I stepped into that gallery at the Walker, the story and the aesthetics of this painting had been germinating for quite some time. That day, the moment had come to bear the cathartic fruit. Frida’s painting is both generative and restorative. A beautiful irony exists in this piece; a work about loss and grieving contains the possibility of cleansing, healing, and giving life to those who are fortunate enough to experience it.

Notes:

For more on Aristotle and the arts, I recommend Gerald F. Else’s 1957 interpretation of *Politics*.

For more biographic and artistic information on Frida Kahlo, I recommend *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* by Hayden Herrera and *Devouring Frida: The Art History and Popular Celebrity of Frida Kahlo* by Margaret A. Lindhauer.