

Exhibition of paintings by Mexican artist Frida Kahlo displayed

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An exhibition of paintings by Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, whose tortured visions proclaimed her "own reality," will be on display April 7 to May 17 in the Mandeville Art Gallery at the University of California, San Diego.

This first retrospective showing since 1938 of Kahlo's works will be seen in only six cities in the United States and the Mandeville Gallery is the only gallery in California selected for the tour. Opening ceremonies will take place from 5 to 8 p.m. Thursday, April 6.

Kahlo has been categorized mistakenly as a Surrealist and as a primitive artist. She is neither. The persistence and strength of her images amid the physical and emotional torment of her life have inspired contemporary feminists though her very personal chronicle defies those who think they can define her.

What has been called the "essence of her reality" was determined swiftly and brutally one September day in 1925 when, as a 15-year-old returning from school, she was injured in a bus crash in Mexico City. Her life thereafter, until her death in 1954, was a relentless repetition of pain, hospitalization and invalidism, much of it due to her dogged determination to become a mother. She could not because of her injuries and suffered a series of miscarriages and therapeutic abortions.

She herself, however, was far from a melancholy invalid. According to Hayden Herrera, writing in the Kahlo exhibition publication, "Much of the time (the artist) led a normal, active life. She loved fiestas, excursions and political demonstrations... Kahlo's friends even now recall her marvelous 'alegría,' her passion for life."

As for her style, says Herrera, "(The artist) is so simple and unpretentious that many people have termed her a primitive. But they are mistaken. She is a mock primitive. Her naive style and fantasy were chosen for sophisticated reasons. And her imagery, though straightforward, is so hallucinatory that the Surrealists claimed her as one of their own. And they were wrong, too. Although Kahlo's art after 1937 does reflect a knowledge of Surrealism, her fantasy comes straight from her own experience and from her absorption in Mexican culture -- what she called 'my own reality.'"

While Kahlo's subject matter was almost preeminently her own life -- herself as daughter, mother, wife, lover, invalid -- she drew richly and generously upon traditional Mexican themes, symbols, images and stories both religious and secular. Kahlo the artist was also Kahlo the troubled though romanticized mate of muralist Diego Rivera with whom she maintained a relationship fraught with upheaval, separation, divorce, reconciliation, scandal and public exposition of private passions.

"(Their) goings-on," writes Herrera, "were treated by the Mexican press as the amusing foibles of minor deities. As artists the Riveras were granted freedom from convention. And that freedom allowed Kahlo not only to paint the most shockingly intimate subjects in the most direct and unsqueamish manner, but also to create of herself a mythic creature."

It was this frank outpouring of her most painfully conceived revelations, her depiction of her own self embroiled in intensely female experiences which has attracted the admiration and occasionally the worship of the feminist movement.

The Mandeville Gallery exhibition will coincide with a three-day Cinco de Mayo celebration during which special events to supplement and highlight the Kahlo show will be scheduled. Events and times will be announced at a later date. The celebration will be held May 5, 6, and 7.

The film, "The Life and Death of Frida Kahlo," will be shown Thursdays at noon and Sundays at 2 p.m. in room 103 of the Mandeville Center throughout the exhibition period. The film is free and open to the public.

The Kahlo show is supported in part through grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the California Arts Council, Chancellor William D. McElroy, the UC San Diego University Events Office and the Student Affirmative Action Committee.

Mandeville Gallery hours, except for the opening ceremonies April 6, are noon to 5 p.m. Sunday through Friday and 7 to 10 p.m., Wednesdays.

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