

Film Review

– *Frida*, directed by Carla Gutierrez.¹ Mexico and the United States, 2024.²

Frida is an experimental documentary that presents a portrait of the renowned Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, using film to reinterpret her paintings through new forms and juxtapositions. Instead of offering a conventional biography, director Carla Gutierrez employs montage and visual intervention to blur the line between Kahlo's inner world and her painted self-portraits. In so doing, the film positions itself within current debates on biographical documentaries, treating archival materials not as neutral historical records but as acts of aesthetic and interpretive intervention.

Making her feature-length directorial debut, Gutierrez's extensive background as an editor is evident. When the documentary turns to Kahlo's paintings, it functions much like DK Welchman's compelling portrait of Vincent Van Gogh, *Loving Vincent* (2017), in which the artist's works provide the basis for the film's narrative. In addition, *Frida* exploits the potential of layer-separated photographs, double exposures and 3D imaging, often to the benefit of both her subject and Kahlo's oeuvre. Gutierrez treats the photographs and images in her film not as untouchable artefacts, but as malleable materials to be shaped and reshaped to suit her subject's expression. While this is largely done successfully, at times this approach is pushed too far, particularly in the colourisation of monochrome archival footage, where mismatched palettes can feel jarring. Still, Gutierrez's hand firmly anchors *Frida* within the Mexican artistic tradition to which Kahlo was deeply committed. Avoiding conventional interviews and voice-overs, the director draws on Kahlo's diaries and letters to deliver both a compelling narrative voice and a sense of authenticity that matches Kahlo's devotion to her art. In the film, the 'text' and paintings illuminate and illustrate one another. Presented entirely in Spanish, *Frida* features voice-over readings of Kahlo's writings performed by Mexican actor Fernanda Echevarría del Rivero, as no recordings of Kahlo herself survive.

Gutierrez's exploration of Kahlo's life is largely chronological. Rather than following a tightly constructed narrative, *Frida* takes shape as a loosely ordered montage, unfolding through a sequence of visual and emotional moments instead of conventional documentary storytelling. The film, for example,

shows how her father – an avid reader and, unusually for Catholic Mexico, an atheist – nurtured her strong-willed resistance to grow up, which only strengthened as she matured. Gutierrez also highlights a defining moment in Kahlo's youth: a tram accident that left her hospitalised with severe injuries and lasting damage to her spine. After that trauma, as the film demonstrates, her painting becomes more inflected by a steely vision. In addition, *Frida* visualises Kahlo's most harrowing experiences, such as her initial joy and wonder at the prospect of giving birth, followed by the devastation of miscarriage, through animated canvases, where bodily fragmentation and symbolic excess captivate the viewer. In these moments, editing replaces exposition: Kahlo's paintings become vehicles for biographical trauma, transforming lived experience into a visual language of loss and painful artistic discovery.

Regarding Kahlo's sexuality, *Frida* depicts the contours of her amorous relationships with both men and women, presenting intimacy not as scandalous but as another register of self-fashioning. Gutierrez's editing treats these relationships elliptically, favouring suggestive visual clusters drawn from diaries and paintings over linear narrative resolution. The film introduces her husband, Diego Rivera, the love of her life and an artist himself, less as an historical figure in his own right and more as a foil for her artistic development. Gutierrez frames their relationship through a selective montage of paintings and diary entries that emphasise vocation over romance, presenting Rivera as a catalyst for Kahlo's complete identification with painting as a way of life. Following her divorce, Kahlo began selling her work for the first time.

In addition, echoing Yeats' resolve, "myself must I remake," she increasingly turns to self-portraiture as her health begins to deteriorate: "I paint myself because I'm what I know... My self-portraits are a true expression of my emotions." In the film, there is a striking pairing of a self-portrait in which Kahlo sits upright, characteristically elegant and composed, with an image of her ailing body positioned behind her, stretched out on a hospital trolley, scarred and bleeding. Behind this, the landscape fractures: the ground is cratered, and the sky is split between daylight and moonlight. The film extends the painting's power through cinematic means. The camera's movements and the raised components of the artwork come together and pull apart, evoking new versions of her tormented self.

Through these editorial and visual choices, *Frida* ultimately portrays Kahlo's sexual appetite and individualism as inseparable from her artistic method: through her affairs, her language, and her anger at the conformity she rejects. She painted, she swore, she laughed, she made love. Kahlo relished abandon in life; it was how she embraced the world and pursued her own vision. As she says in words that encapsulate the portrait revealed in the film: "Viva la Vida." One aspect that feels underdeveloped in *Frida* is the impact of Zapata and the Mexican Revolution, which began in 1910, despite their significance in Kahlo's life. Although the narration acknowledges her embrace of communism as "the basis of my determination," the film largely foregrounds

her aesthetic and emotional concerns. As a result, Kahlo's forceful self-assertion is most vividly expressed through her art and personal life, while her political commitments remain largely in the background. Even so, *Frida* stands as an elegant and visually daring documentary that compellingly brings Kahlo's inner world to the screen, despite an aesthetic focus that at times limits the scope of its broader inquiry.

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Notes

- 1 Imagine Documentaries, Time Studios and Storyville Films. Produced by Sara Bernstein, Loren Hammonds, Alexandra Johnes, Katie Maguire and Justin Wilke.
- 2 The 88-minute documentary film premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2024 and is distributed internationally via Amazon Prime Video.