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Frida Kahlo and Ana Mendieta: Disrupting the Male Gaze with Symbols of Blood and Hair

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Abstract

Frida Kahlo and Ana Mendieta are female artists of color who use blood and hair to connect to their homelands, work through trauma, speak out against violence against women and redefine femininity. Surrealistic elements and portraiture allow Kahlo to represent her personal experience and connect to her Mexican heritage with clothing, flora, animals and musical references. Mendieta connects to her Cuban roots by reverting back to her birthplace and so creates a sense of belonging and sanctuary with her body. Blood is a symbol and a metaphor that aligns both artists by topics of violence, death and loss. Specifically, Kahlo and Mendieta include blood and body imagery to draw attention to violent acts against women in their communities. Hair imagery in Kahlo's paintings display rejection of the idea that her long hair defines her ability to be beautiful or feminine according to the male gaze. Mendieta plays with facial hair, specifically on her own face to challenge the ideas of gender roles and the ways in which body hair on women is regulated by social norms. This paper argues that the symbols of blood and hair allow Kahlo and Mendieta to combat the male gaze, redefine codes of femininity beyond sexual objectification and eradicate the confines for women in the art world.

1. Introduction

Ana Mendieta and Frida Kahlo are formidable feminist artists and women of color who both use their art to connect to their heritage and challenge artistic confines. Surrealistic elements and portraiture allow Kahlo to represent her personal experience and connect to her Mexican heritage with clothing, flora, animals and musical references. Mendieta creates body art with natural elements to formulate performative works that are often enacted directly for viewers or in nature and then replicated on film. Mendieta connects to her Cuban roots by recalling her birthplace and so creates a sense of belonging and sanctuary with her body. Mendieta and Kahlo defy gender norms and the constructs that constricted them as women sexually and socially in the twentieth century. This paper argues that the symbols of blood and hair allow Kahlo and Mendieta to combat the male gaze, redefine codes of femininity beyond sexual objectification and eradicate the confines for women in the art world.

2. The Male Gaze in Art

The "male gaze" is a concept in visual art dependent on the depiction of women as primarily objects of masculine attraction, therefore creating a limited view of female importance in art and in society. The male gaze dissected by Edward Snow includes "motifs of voyeurism, objectification, fetishism, scopophilia, woman as the object of male pleasure and the bearer of male lack."[1] The male driven representation of women in artwork perpetuates misogyny and sets standards for women being most famously characterized as sexual objects for the purpose of male pleasure.

The pattern of this particular gaze throughout art history and media provides a significantly male point of view and presents women as mere subjects of sexual fantasy, rather than people.

While art is not exclusive to any particular group, artworks themselves prescribe ideal viewing positions based on the influence and the artist. Primarily male perspectives and depictions of women create a narrow scope of how women are portrayed in art. Despite the fact that many women obviously also appreciate art, the stance they must assume in order to indulge in artworks in the ways disposed by tradition, requires the donning of a masculine perceptual attitude.[2] Primarily male perspectives represented in artwork further perpetuate a male dominated art world and confine women into a male vision, depriving them of any further agency and identity beyond objectification. Feminists and scholars such as Snow and Korsmeyer reference the male gaze and issues brought forth for the prescribed ideal woman based on appearance, subsequently fabricating a construct of beauty as a category of value for women.

Objectifying women is a tactic to reduce their complete value down to simply their appearance and performativity of feminine criteria brought about by a misogynistic patriarchy. It is apparent that "the female body is exhibited as 'lack' in its requirement of constant 'self-creation' as 'feminine'- a body is not feminine, culturally and socially speaking, it has not achieved this status."[3] Masculinity is the standard from which femininity is based, making feminine traits the opposite of masculine ones. The notion of the two being opposite is a problematic statement because any masculine strength must then be considered a feminine weakness. The standard for what is considered feminine in opposition to what is masculine sets an impossible ideal for women to performatively uphold rather than simply exist as women on their own terms. Culturally feminine ideals that women are expected to sustain are included in dress, removing body hair, enhancing feminine features with makeup (eyelashes, lips, hair) and being consistent with the male gaze ideal of a woman's appearance.

Gender is however "in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed, rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts."[4] In order to be deemed worthy of anything in this male gaze driven system, women must prove their ability to recreate this oversexualized version of what being a woman is in the eyes of a patriarchal society. Women are not simply allowed to exist without this constructed idea of the ideal body type and grooming trend that allows them to be accepted as feminine creatures whereas "male bodies are, in contrast, produced as 'existing' as male, not as achieving 'maleness."[5] This particular imbalance of societal expectations for women to prove their identity as feminine in order to be considered women of importance creates a narrow scope of how women are portrayed in artwork.

The male gaze neutralizes the portrayal of women as muses and thus, denies much else. Mendieta and Kahlo challenge the concept of the male gaze by reverting the perspective of their works beyond sexual fantasy and the ideals of feminine beauty set forth by their society in the twentieth century. It is evident that each artist utilizes the symbol of hair and blood to express identity and experience beyond the male driven perspective of how women should appear. Likewise, each presents her body beyond sexualization and instead as a symbol of strength and triumph through violence and trauma. Kahlo and Mendieta challenge the male gaze dynamic by creating a new way for the female body and identity to be seen on their terms, regaining a sense of agency that has been previously stripped from the female body by male depictions of the female form driven by the male gaze.

3. Hair as Subversive Image and Material

In Western culture, hair has been a symbol of strength and virility. The state of each person's *coiffure* revealed their virtues and was thought to hold power. In ancient times, people did not cut their hair because doing so would cause an individual to lose power like the Biblical figure Samson experienced when his magical locks were stripped away. Over time hair length became more versatile amongst men and less related to masculinity. However, women have been specifically defined by the state of their hair throughout history. As much as hairstyles have changed, long hair and the femininity of a woman remain intertwined. Hair is a valued characteristic of a woman's beauty and is classic to the poetic description of a woman as her ultimate feminine feature in music, writing and artwork.[6] Graceful, soft flowing hair is a symbol and tactic of seduction for women and is often heavily considered in whether a woman is physically attractive.[7] Men are not held to such specific standards, they remain masculine despite the length of their hair, however a woman with her hair cut short is thought to no longer possess feminine beauty and virility according to societal standards.

In contrast, body hair on a woman is "described as 'unfeminine,' 'excess hair,' 'superfluous hair,' or 'unwanted hair."[8] The only time women's body hair becomes a topic of discussion is in considering methods for removal. Female body hair is otherwise left out of the conversation because it is socially expected to be unseen or removed from the legs, armpits, face and genitals which are locations on the body in areas considered 'masculine' for hair growth. It is common that women's body hair is not even mentioned in the conversation as a natural occurrence. Instead, it is an

avoided topic, only mentioned in a conversation encompassed with shame, disgust and censure.[9] The interesting aspect of the normativity of hair removal of women in contemporary Western culture is that the areas considered 'masculine' for hair growth and the norm for women to remove hair in those areas is not based on biology or medical health, it is strictly a societal norm.[10] This fact further perpetuates the theme in femininity that it is not simply possessed by women, but that being feminine must be achieved by means of altering a woman's appearance to attain passiveness in being hairless. Hair growth on men is means of maturing and a process of puberty. Women however are expected to deny this aspect of themselves and uphold a standard of hairlessness that perpetuates a continuing youthful and prepubescent standard in order to be considered feminine.

Untitled (Facial Hair Transplant), 1972, Suite of seven edition photographs, edition of 10, 16 x 20 in., Courtesy Galerie, Lelong & Co. New York, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/ana-mendieta-sugar-hill-childrens-museum-1119071.

Mendieta's work *Untitled (Facial Hair Transplant)*, 1972 is a photograph of herself with her hair tied back tightly into a bun to accentuate a black, bushy, curled mustache, the only seemingly masculine feature in the image, (Fig. 1). The photographs taken document the performance piece to catalogue the process of Mendieta attaching facial hair from a male counterpart's face and gluing the follicles to her own upper lip to eventually form a full mustache. *Untitled (Facial Hair Transplant)* provides an avenue for Mendieta to disrupt the idea of what it means to be feminine with her use of real hair to produce the striking mustache.[11] The photograph contradicts the line between masculine versus feminine ideals because even with facial hair, Mendieta remains soft and feminine. She is wearing large gold hoops and a red turtleneck long sleeve with her eyebrows fully shaped, which contrasts with the bold mustache.

Untitled (Facial Hair Transplant) appears to comment on the idea that women cannot be both feminine and possess hair on their faces and or bodies because Mendieta does not change anything about her original appearance other than the bulky mustache. Although the mustache becomes the focal point of the photograph, the hair matches her own. The mustache is a playful way in which Mendieta disrupts the ideal of female beauty and identity. While women are taught to remove any facial hair that would be considered masculine, Mendieta defies this construct by doing the complete opposite and adding more hair to her upper lip. The "transplant" was influential for a performance piece in the 1970s because gender roles for facial hair were not so commonly challenged. Unlike Mendieta, women in the time period were not commonly challenging the rules of facial hair removal and fighting to bear bushy mustaches instead.

Figure 2. *Untitled (Facial Hair Transplants)*, 1972, Suite of seven estate color photographs, Four sheets 13 ¼ x 20 in; three sheets: 20 x 13 ¼ in., Courtesy of The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC, and Galerie Lelong, New York, https://hammer.ucla.edu/radical-women/art/art/untitled-facial-hair-transplants.

Mendieta continued experimenting with facial hair further with *Untitled (Facial Hair Transplants)*, 1972 which is a continuation of the same performance project, (Fig. 2). Mendieta had her friend shave off his beard while during that process, she proceeded to attach the facial hair to her own face until she attained a full beard and his was fully shaven. Fig 2 is documented photos of the operation. Mendieta and her male counterpart both lean over a mirror. As he removes the hair from his chin, Mendieta is photographed picking the pieces off the table and attaching them to her own jaw line. Adjacent to the images of the beard application process, Mendieta is photographed in a yellow shirt staring intently into the camera straight on. Her eyes glisten and her soft features allow the rough beard around her chin and cheeks to contradict the definition of feminine beauty in contemporary Western society. With the application of facial hair onto her own face, Mendieta challenges the proposed societal passiveness of femininity and actively rejects the vision set forth for her as a woman and instead chooses the complete opposite. As a Cuban woman, Mendieta possesses dark, thick hair which is often more prominent on the face and near the ears. Rather than removing those aspects of hair from her face, instead she adds more to accentuate something that is seen to be completely taboo for women to possess.

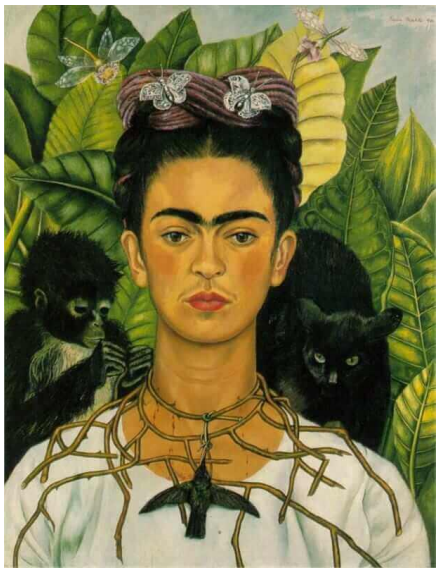

Figure 3. *Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird*, 1940, Oil on canvas, 19 x 24 in., Harry Ransom Center, Austin, Texas, https://www.fridakahlo.org/self-portrait-with-thorn-necklace-and-hummingbird.jsp.

Frida Kahlo also depicts herself with facial hair in her *Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird*, a painting she completed in 1940, (Fig 3). Kahlo is depicted staring forward, not at the viewer but into the distance, as if she is in contemplation. The thorn necklace adorns her neck while cutting into it, allowing blood to stream down her bust. On her shoulders sit a monkey on the left and a black cat on the right. A dead hummingbird is painted hanging from a string tied to the thorn necklace. The wings of the hummingbird mimic the shape of her prominent unibrow as the focal point of the painting. Mexican flora and fauna decorate the background in lavish hues while lively dragonflies hover over Kahlo's head.[12] Her vacant stare into the distance perpetuates a specific numbness in accordance with the blood dripping from her neck, as if Kahlo doesn't notice the pain. Her husband, Diego Rivera, gifted her a monkey during their marriage, it is a theory that the monkey could be a symbol of his inflicted pain on her.[13] Since the painting was completed in 1940 following Kahlo's divorce from Rivera, the portrait may symbolize her strength and separation from the pain in her heart.

A formidable aspect of Kahlo's self-portrait is the detailing of her facial hair. Kahlo subtly includes aspects of her Mexican features and purposefully makes her unibrow and subtle mustache prominent in every artwork she painted. Due to her mustache being "a 'natural' growth that has not been removed by human agency; and 'feminine' -because it has not been shaved off, therefore it is a signifier for a 'passive' sexuality."[14] Women are considered the passive sex and cutting hair is considered a 'masculine act' which would label her allowance of her mustache to grow as a 'passive act' and therefore feminine. However, there is also discourse that female hair removal has been normalized and therefore avoidance of removing it is also an act of intention.[15] Nonetheless, Kahlo redefines what it means to be a woman despite any pressure to make hair scarce on her body, most specifically her face. Her striking unibrow actually ended up becoming her signifier and a unique symbol of beauty and power since she gained fame nearly two decades after her death in 1954.

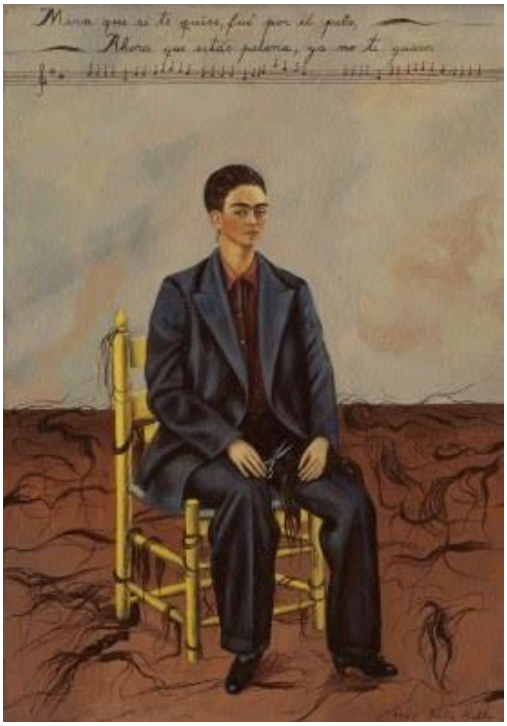

Figure 4. *Portrait with Cropped Hair*, 1940, Oil on Canvas, 1′ 4″ x 0′ 11″, MoMA, Manhattan, NY, https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78333.

Kahlo establishes her own liberation from codes of femininity by painting herself with her hair cut short, presented in what would be considered a masculine pose. The painting *Portrait with Cropped Hair*, 1940 was completed by Kahlo following her divorce to Diego Rivera (Fig. 4). The painting emulates her empowerment as she has cut off her long raven hair, a symbol of her femininity. The loose tendrils of hair hold a sense of animation and Kahlo has depicted them stringy and disheveled, as though once the hair leaves her head it becomes useless and grotesque. The virility of her long locks is clearly faded following the blunt cut with scissors. Kahlo is depicted in the center of the painting in an empty space, sitting in a chair dressed in a man's suit and a crimson dress shirt (possibly Diego Rivera's). Kahlo sits up straight gripping scissors that rest in front of her lap as wisps of hair surround her on the ground and hang lifelessly off the yellow chair. The red of her shirt, the orange of the floor and the color in her cheeks correlate with the pastel orange clouds in the background against a light turquoise. At the top of the painting, lyrics in Spanish are painted in brown, surrounded by musical notes. The lyrics reference a Mexican folk song, they read "look, if I loved you it was because of your hair. Now that you are without hair, I don't love you anymore."[16] In the absence of a man, Frida Kahlo has become even more powerful with her hair stripped away and her face fully visible in its absence.

Prior to art historian and feminist Lindauer's approach to discussing *Portrait with Cropped Hair*, critics posed a critique on the painting claiming that it is a 'foolish rejection of female sexuality' due to the fact that Kahlo is stripping herself of something that largely constitutes her beauty in the context of the male gaze.[17] However, the painting is reference to much more meaning and symbolic relevance. The painting is self-empowering as Kahlo has shed the thing that is most symbolic of her beauty and femininity in a lover's eyes. To contextualize the cutting of her hair further, in Mexican culture, "sexuality is constructed in terms of 'acts' rather than 'object choice.' 'masculine' acts are 'active'; and feminine 'acts' are passive."[18] It is clear in *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* that Kahlo intentionally ornamented the scene to create the act of her cutting her hair clear, an act that is not considered feminine.[19] With the portrait Kahlo is altering her identity and appearance through a "masculine" act Kahlo with which she is able to liberate herself from the gender role in which she has been cast.[20] Kahlo is presenting her identity beyond gender-based beauty standards and sitting confidently in what would be considered male clothing. Kahlo and Mendieta achieve the same outcome, although hair as a symbol in their artwork is used to counteract feminine beauty standards that confine women to specific hairstyles or ritual grooming. Both artists challenge gender norms by displacing or removing hair to redefine what it means to be feminine.

4. Blood as Material

There is a reason blood is such a common theme in visual art. Blood holds an intriguing nature, "blood is fascinating; it simultaneously represents purity and impurity, the sacred and the profane, life and death."[21] A commonality between both Kahlo and Mendieta is their use of blood as a theme throughout their portfolios of work. While blood acts as an agent to capture the viewer due to shock factor, it is also symbolic of pain and suffering in Kahlo and Mendieta's work. Mendieta cultivates blood as a symbol of sacrifice and homeland in her work in addition to the trauma. The state of blood itself becomes symbolic of timing and violent nature in whether it appears wet or dry.

Figure 5. *Untitled (Rape Scene),* 1973, Photograph, color on paper, 254 × 203 mm, Tate Gallery, Britain, https://artblart.com/tag/ana-mendieta-rape-scene/.

Mendieta's performance piece *Untitled (Rape Scene),* 1973 was a work in response to the rape of Sara Ann Ottens, a nursing student at the University of Iowa who was brutally raped and murdered by another student in March 1973 (Fig. 5). Mendieta shocked her peers at the University of Iowa with the performance that she set up in her apartment off campus. Viewers were invited into Mendieta's apartment where a door left ajar revealed the scene of Mendieta's naked form tied to a living room table, painted with blood. The scene is documented in color film and allows the blood to be extremely evident in vigorous smears that are visibly dried onto Mendieta's backside. Her blood-stained backside stands in full view, fixed in place with her undergarments around her ankles. Stark light beaming from the corner of the scene casts a sharp shadow behind Mendieta's half-naked and exposed body in the back of the room. The performance piece was a recreation of the Sara Ann Ottens' rape scene as it was described in the police report. The light cast from a single direction onto Mendieta's intentionally lifeless body provides a narrative that the viewers are the first to discover the body of the victim after being raped and murdered by the perpetrator. Mendieta reportedly held the particular bent over position for about an hour before breaking the scene.

The recreation of the scene challenged students to face the violence and wrongful death of Ottens on their campus with fully explicit recreation in person. Daniel Tan characterizes Mendieta's performance to be crossing the gap between conviction and imagination. With the blatant scene into which Mendieta invited the audience, she forced them to confront the situation without the "luxury of contemplation and consideration, Mendieta obliges an in-the-moment, visceral response of the audience—are they to run to help her? are they to gape and watch? are they to turn and abandon her? or are they to further abuse her?"[22] The graphic performance was an artful way in which Mendieta was able to react to the wrongful violence against women, specifically one in her college community. The piece is

especially powerful to Mendieta in the way that the violent act could have been done to her or any of her female classmates alike.

The performance work was a comment on how people respond to violence, tragedy and horror (a common theme in Mendieta's work). As she stayed in place, the audience discussed the scene as they would hearing about such a traumatic situation. The audience simply witnessed the crime scene but failed to do anything about it, that is the point Mendieta aimed for. Her message is powerful in communicating the actions of others in violent situations that they are not involved in themselves and their ability to walk away. Viewers gawk at the violent scene but fail to take action. The message is reminiscent of real cases of abuse or sexual assault. *Untitled (Rape Scene)* inspired a sense of empathy from the viewers beyond their interest in gossip and gore because it put each witness within the scene and forced them to relive the trauma of the victim.

Mendieta explained that the highly publicized rape on her school campus "moved and frightened' her, elaborating: 'I think all my work has been like that – a personal response to a situation ... I can't see being theoretical about an issue like that."[23] Mendieta completed another piece in the same year called in *Clinton Piece, Dead on Street*. Similar to the previous work Mendieta stripped naked to lay in a pool of blood. The piece is a play on the exploitation of victims as Mendieta "lay motionless in a pool of blood as though she were an accident or a crime victim, while a fellow student stood over her taking pictures with a flash camera as though recording the accident for the press or the police."[24] The wrongful death of Ottens awakened a force in Mendieta, she began including blood and violence against women as a common theme in her work following 1973.

Figures 6-9. *Untitled (People Looking at Blood),* 1973, Super-8mm film, The Estate of the Ana Mendieta Collection, https://rubd.tumblr.com/post/68362117406/in-the-super-8-film-moffitt-building-piece-ana.

Mendieta became captivated by the symbol of blood and the presence of fresh blood as a sign of danger, violence, and death. Her performance work *Untitled (People Looking at Blood, Moffit),* is a series of stills from a real of super-8 film Mendieta shot of people walking past a puddle of animal blood Mendieta placed outside her apartment in order to appear as though it was leaking from her door onto the sidewalk (Figs. 6-9). With a constant use of blood, Mendieta catered her body of work to creating a dialogue around violence, power and the mere indifference people develop after becoming desensitized. As people passed by, she photographed the subjects' reactions in noticing the gruesome sight of a fresh puddle of blood. Most of her subjects did not pay further attention to the blood past their initial reaction, they continued on their way as they would seeing a penny on the ground. The ability of each person to come across the blood and quickly move on with their day communicates their ability to disregard violence especially in the event that does not involve them.

Dawn Perlmutter, a forensic scholar, describes the use of blood in performance art, equates states of blood with our abilities to interpret time and violence. She explains that "the properties of blood, for example, vividly illustrate the entire operation of violence. . . Blood that dries on the victim soon loses its viscous quality and becomes first a dark sore, then a roughened scab."[25] This relates to the performance piece *Untitled (Rape Scene)* because Mendieta is performing the aftermath of a violent act of rape and murder. Mendieta as the naked victim is left covered in dried blood, a scene that cannot be anything but talked about by the onlookers in the audience out of pure shock from discovering Mendieta without warning. Dried blood is a grotesque sight and sends a different message than fresh blood because "blood that is allowed to congeal on its victim is the impure product of violence, illness or death."[26]

Dried blood attaches to a victim and solidifies with time, creating a sense of permanence of the trauma and violence. The state of blood also constitutes the context of a story or situation. It is often used to signify pain or loss of an individual. Dry blood presents itself more permanently, it signifies the passing of time.

Wet blood is more immediate and is characterized by a free-flowing nature and the possibility to remove it before it has dried. Wet blood is raw and alive. The fresh blood Mendieta purposefully placed on the sidewalk for the photograph series *Untitled (People Looking at Blood, Moffit),* perpetuates the narrative that fresh blood of newly slaughtered victims "is never allowed to congeal, but is removed without a trace as soon as the rites have been concluded."[27] The scene Mendieta created with fresh blood leaking from her door is more temporary, especially as onlookers ignore the scene. The blood could be washed from the sidewalk and no one would know it had been there if it was not reported. *Untitled (Rape Scene)* was replicating a crime scene which makes Mendieta a victim that has been discovered and the trace of dried blood has been left behind as evidence. *Untitled (People Looking at Blood, Moffit),* depicts blood that is still wet, meaning it could be wiped away and only remain as a memory of the onlookers who ignored it. *Untitled (People Looking at Blood, Moffit* and *Untitled (Rape Scene)* are both artworks in response to violence against women. *Untitled People Looking at Blood "*revealed our readiness to ignore everyday signs of violence- a common thread in Mendieta's *oeuvre* in which she persistently tried to get people to see "other bodies" as their own."[28] With the staged rape scene Mendieta surprised her audience with a set up crime scene where she herself is the subject. The photographs of the people spotting blood on the sidewalk however reverse the focus of the artwork onto the audience themselves. Mendieta adopts the audience as the subject and their reaction to the blood informs the meaning of her piece.

Figure 10. *Untitled (Blood and Feathers #2),* Super-8mm film, The Estate of the Ana Mendieta Collection, https://arthistoryproject.com/artists/ana-mendieta/untitled-blood-and-feathers-2/.

Blood is a multifaceted symbol to Mendieta; it is present in her work to communicate religious meaning. Religious qualities of blood are present specifically in Mendieta's film *Untitled (Blood and Feathers #2), (Fig. 10)*. The film renders Mendieta standing naked in front of a creek in Iowa as she faces the camera directly. She keeps eye contact while pouring blood out of flask down the front of her naked body. She then reaches behind her, pouring the remaining liquid down her back, tossing the container away from herself. She follows by gently rolling her body in feathers. The viscosity of the blood allows the feathers to stick to her body and she rises coated in light and fuzzy material. The film ends slowly as she raises her arms in the shape of wings, maintaining her original strong stare.[29] With the creek behind her, Mendieta stays true to her connection with nature and the water acts as a means of purity.

The scene is intentional in all the symbols she uses, "the blood, feathers, the naked female body-are reminiscent of religious rituals. Blood is central to Catholic rites, the religion in which Mendieta was raised, and the sacrifice of animals is a vital part of Santeria, an Afro-Caribbean religion the artist would draw on for inspiration repeatedly."[30]

The blood symbolizes the essence of the animal and allows for rebirth because it is wet and viscous enough to allow the feathers to stick. This idea of purity in blood is no new idea to sacrificial faiths. As the life of the animal is sacrificed, a new life emerges.

The performance is Mendieta's transformation into a more "spiritual existence." Mendieta's identification with the sacrificial which became a theme included in her work more than with *Untitled (Rape Scene)*. Her fascination with blood and sacrifice stems, in part, from her sense of loss after being dislocated as a child from her family and home in Cuba, sent into exile in the US with her sister in 1961 as a result of the political upheavals there.[31] Blood and violence are intensely connected in Mendieta's body of work, but she also connects it to loss and rebirth in her religion. Santeria's sacrificial traditions connect to the artwork with the traditional use of sacred stones, herbs and animal sacrifice which all played a prominent role in Santeria ritualistic practice.[32] All three objects were often included in rituals, an example includes increased powers of sacred stones after blood from animal sacrifice flows over them.[33] This phenomenon in Santeria connects to the idea that sacrificial animal blood can provide increased powers and rebirth.

Mendieta includes ritualistic aspects of her cultural religion to connect to her home and her heritage by practicing Santeria more symbolically than literally in her performance artwork. Kaira M. Cabañas describes Mendieta's fascination with Santeria where she claims to have a connection with the "goddess of Sweetwater," the Oricha Ochun in the Santeria pantheon. Ochun is a symbol of female sexuality, owner of the rivers and ruler of blood. Mendieta's use of blood in her performances relating to Santeria sacrifice also link her nude body, which can be presumed to be a symbol of taking back her representation and sexuality.[34] The inclusion of Santeria ritual within Mendieta's body of work connects her to a community of Cuban refugees whose religious practices are misunderstood in the context of Western understanding in America.[35] Mendieta's obvious reference to Santeria ritual further connects her to the exiled community of Cubans in America while bringing further attention and understanding in the way the religion is perceived by Western viewers.

Catholic traditions are more linked to blood as a symbol, in practice they often use wine to symbolize and embody the blood of Christ in communion called transubstantiation. It began as a practician 1263 aligning with "Post-New Testament paradigm in which the accidents of the sacrificial bread, the Host, used during the celebration of Mass are visibly seen to drip blood, blood that for the believers is actual blood of Christ."[36] Proofs of transubstantiation were acts of miracle in the Bible and stressed the idea of blood as healing property, such proofs of the legitimacy of transubstantiation and the idea of the host and blood as credible were embraced enthusiastically by the faithful.[37] The presumed healing and reviving quality of blood is similarly connected in Santeria and Catholicism.

Fig. 11 – *Las Dos Fridas*, 1939, Oil on canvas, 5'8" x 5' 8," Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City, https://www.fridakahlo.org/the-two-fridas.jsp.

Kahlo, a Mexican Catholic relates to the idea of rebirth with the use of blood in her own religious background. Kahlo utilizes the theme of blood in her work to communicate pain and loss. Her painting *Las Dos Fridas,* 1939 exhibits the exchange of blood between two hearts as the two figures hold hands (Fig. 11). Each Frida depicted in the painting is

dressed according to the split heritage of Kahlo's parents. The Frida on the left, painted in a white dress is a representation of Kahlo's European Heritage. The Frida on the right is dressed more casually in traditional indigenous clothing to symbolize the heritage from her mother's side. This version of Kahlo is the one closest to her. The style of dress is what Kahlo normally wore which although were considered peasant clothes it was a way in which Kahlo represented the sensual and more earthbound qualities that she saw as more 'real' than the sophisticated urban outlook. The style of dress was also a way of declaring an allegiance to the people.[38] With the two versions of herself to represent her split heritage, Kahlo is representing the mixing of blood and culture "as a result, the body/bodies of Frida become an icon for the Mexican nation and represent the turbulent period of colonization and its after-effects."[39] The *Two Fridas* communicate Kahlo's split heritage and her inability to choose just one version of who she is as the two figures are connected to create a full Kahlo.

The European depiction of Kahlo in a traditionally white dress is gripping a pair of scissors to cut the vein deliberately disconnecting the blood flow to the heart, allowing patches of blood to stain the immaculate white dress and the heart to appear incomplete and gaping open. This side of herself is cutting off the blood supply, which is dangerously making her bleed out. The act of self-harm is a tactic in which Kahlo presumably portrays her pain and desire for a release. Her indigenous Kahlo is holding a miniature photograph of Diego Rivera, her previous husband. The ties of the two women symbolize Kahlo's versions of herself and their shared pain. The painting is reminiscent of the heartbreak over her marriage and loss of love and possibly loss of her own identity through the massive changes Kahlo faced as a young woman. However, the blood stream remains wet and possibly reparable. The two version of herself remain connected through the bleeding vein meanwhile holding hands in support of each other as though they are both experiencing the pain in unison. In the tragedy of a marriage ended Kahlo remains strong in supporting herself and remembering where she comes from. The two Frida's might be symbolic of her internal strength and triumph through pain and heartbreak and her willingness to maintain life beyond pain and suffering.

Figure 12. - *Henry Ford Hospital,* 1932, Oil on canvas, 30.5 x 38 cmDolores Olmedo Collection, Mexico City, Mexico, https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/henry-ford-hospital-frida-kahlo/kgHTa-02kVhHJA.

In 1932 Frida Kahlo painted *Henry Ford Hospital* to grieve the trauma of her miscarriage (Fig. 12). The painting is extremely graphic, Kahlo painted herself naked in a metal hospital bed undergoing a miscarriage as she clutches her stomach in pain while bleeding out onto white sheets. The bed is located in a field of grass outside of what appears to be the city in the distance. Kahlo is completely exposed to the viewer in all her pain which can be seen from a bird's eye view. The painting illuminates surrealistic elements in the intentional depiction of Kahlo's body connected to five bloody cords that extend out above and below her. Each cord unites her with a different object to symbolize different aspects of the experience.

The snail above her head depicts the longevity and slow process of the traumatic loss of blood and with it her child's life. The male fetus appears lifeless and symbolizes Kahlo's desire to have a boy. Beside the fetus there is a model of the female reproductive system connected to a spinal column thought to symbolize the inability for her to carry a baby

to term due to her spinal injury from a bus crash.[40] Below the bed lies a mechanical contraption which is unidentifiable but perhaps connects her body to an autoclave, presumably to symbolize sterility and infertility.[41] An orchid replicates the one given to her by Diego Rivera and his support in all her trauma and loss.[42] The final object connected to Kahlo is the pelvic bone, which is painted slightly damaged, representing the trauma to her body in the miscarriage and her inability to give birth.

Male surrealist artists of the twentieth century commonly emphasized erotic desire and objectification of women. In contrast, Elizabeth Garber characterizes Kahlo's technique in her paintings to instead exhibit erotic violence directed against herself as the subject not 'the other.' Violence is inseparable from the psychological reality of women's sexuality.[43] Theatrical and emotional scenes are prominent in Kahlo's work and by painting herself in her own "mythological performances" and recreating her life with surrealistic elements and imagery on canvas allowed her to cultivate her own performative identity. As a result, the role of the suffering victim became a part of her personal identity and the utter dramatization of her trauma and the pain she endured became a principal element to her self-image.[44] The depiction of herself exposed in pain lying in the Ford Hospital bed, Kahlo is objectifying herself in an entirely different way. Instead of an object of erotic desire and subject for male pleasure Kahlo's nude body is instead a symbol of pain and suffering. The triggering imagery completely deters any form of objectification that could come from the male gaze in art. Kahlo is inviting viewers to feel the pain and loss with her and her nude figure is vulnerable and fragile in losing the ability to perform what she was built to do, bear children.

After her miscarriage, Kahlo begged the doctors to see the fetus, however they would not allow the option. To her the way to cope was to learn and to understand why the fate of her baby had ensued, therefore she asked for medical books to study. The medical books provided to her by her husband Diego Rivera were the inspiration for the imagery recreated in *Henry Ford Hospital.*[45] The bloodlines connect Kahlo to her trauma and to the objects that accompanied her moment of pain and loss. Blood is successfully rendered to communicate the mere tortured performance and painful last lengths Kahlo went through in attempt to bear children. This event in her life caused her to study her condition of becoming sterile and reevaluate her place as a woman in Mexican culture where she was forced to live an unconventional life as a woman with no children. The scene almost becomes theatrical as she is both the subject and the artist. Kahlo adds drama to the scene by elevating different elements of her deep-rooted pain into the sky tied to her nude body by blood lines. Henry Ford Hospital illustrates Kahlo's connection to surrealism in the way that she characterizes the agents of pain.

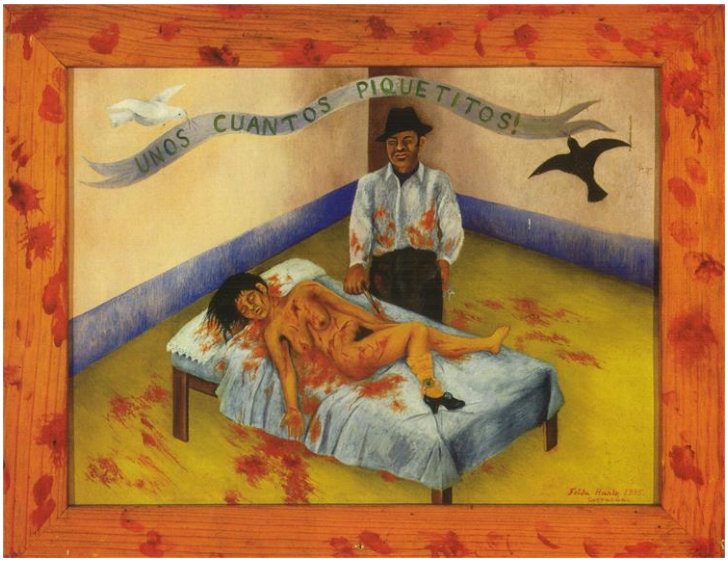

Figure 13. *A Few Small Nips, 1935,* Oil on canvas, 59 x 75 cm, https://www.fridakahlo.org/a-few-small-nips-passionately-in-love.jsp.

Similar to Ana Mendieta, Kahlo uses her art as a response to trauma and a method of grieving loss. Her paintings act as a journal of sorts of her experiences, specifically her pain. The scene of a naked woman in a bed are a point of view used a few times more in Kahlo's paintings, another being the piece *A Few Small Nips* where the bed scene bears resemblance to the same gruesome approach to trauma and female pain. Kahlo further expresses herself as an artist through bloody imagery with her painting *A Few Small Nips, 1935, (Fig. 13).* The work embodies a scene of "a bare,

bloodied lady [lying] on a bed underneath her knife-wielding killer. Like Frida's *Henry Ford Hospital,* her wretchedness is increased by the way her upper and lower body turn in inverse directions."[46] The painting is a reinterpretation of a stabbing reported in the paper of a man stabbing his wife in a drunken rage. Similar to Mendieta's *Untitled (Rape Scene),* Kahlo documents the violent act against a woman in her community. She paints the woman fully bloody and exposed on the bed, as the man remains well dressed and almost smirking while still holding the murder weapon. The use of blood in the scene highlights the grotesque nature of the crime, while the man maintains a smile on his face. The blood is dried on the woman's body, unable to be erased from the scene of violence, much like *Untitled (Rape Scene).* The blood stains the white sheets of the bed, contrasting the green floor while there are even blood spatters painted on the wood frame of the painting further accentuate the grotesque nature of the crime.

The bloody frame adds an extra dramatic feature to the scene, "It is as though the blood was spattered outside of the limits of the frame into the world of the spectator, who becomes an eye-witness to the event."[47] In court, the murderer claimed, "but I just gave her a couple little nips!"[48] A white banner held up by a black and a white dove above the scene replicates the quote in Spanish with the words "*Unos Cauntos Piquetitos*!" Kahlo uses the statement to contrast with the bloody and extremely violent scene. It is as if she is exposing the severity of the crime along with the way it was downplayed in court by the murderer. The painting has a dark humor to it; it is as if Kahlo is making a mockery of the man in the situation where he tries to justify his violence even in the presence of the woman's mutilated, naked and exposed body.

5. Conclusion

Blood and hair are pieces of humanity that symbolize growth and life. Once each of them leaves the human body, they become grotesque and even frightening. The presence of loose hair and dried blood can often signify danger or death. Blood and hair are features of DNA that can be connected to an identity even far after someone is gone. Hair has the power to grow even after a body is dead and buried, morbidly embodying a certain ability for life after death in decomposition. Kahlo and Mendieta include hair as a symbol of femininity and utilize the imagery to counteract normative ideas of feminine grooming and hair length. Mendieta intentionally defies codes of femininity by purposefully adding facial hair to her upper lip to create a billowing mustache. The presumably masculine facial hair demolishes barriers supposed for women to follow in ritual hair removal. Kahlo embraces her subtle mustache and unibrow, passively including the features within her self portraits, therefore escaping imposed gender roles by painting herself so honestly. Kahlo goes as far to cut off her long locks of hair, stripping herself of what is considered her most feminine feature. With the active resistance of gender confines of beauty, she regains a sense of agency despite the pressure from the male gaze and constructs surrounding the ideal for female beauty.

Blood acts as a vehicle for Mendieta to provoked reactions from an audience with her triggering performance works. The symbol of blood allows Mendieta to explore the fragility of life and to remind viewers of the violence women so commonly face in a society so dangerously haunted by gruesome violence against women as a normalcy. Kahlo and Mendieta develop their artwork as an agent to mourn the loss of women in their community that fell victim to very violent deaths. The state of the blood in each work provokes a different narrative. Smears and puddles of blood reflect the brutal attacks imposed on the women and the aftermath of the evil acts against them. Loss of blood relates to loss of life and inflicted pain in each artist's body of work. The repetition of blood throughout Kahlo and Mendieta's artwork vividly communicates the mere trauma and agony each has endured or witnessed in their lives. Religiously Mendieta is connected to blood as a form of purity and ritual rebirth, connecting with her Cuban roots and her ancestors who practiced Santeria. Kahlo connects to her catholic background with the connection of blood and the sacrifice of Christ. It is evident to Kahlo that the blood running through her veins is of two separate sides, European and Mexican. Through bloodline she explores the duality of both identities and the pain endured by each side of herself. Symbols of blood and hair for Kahlo and Mendieta hold a sense of meaning in culture, identity, trauma and loss. Blood and hair allow Kahlo and Mendieta to prescribe a newfound feminine perceptual identity for themselves, declaim against violence committed against women, and to mourn their pain and loss.

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