

April 6, 2018
Fame and *Fridamania*



Last night I had one of my recurrent dreams. It involves discovering a treasure trove of hidden, hitherto unseen precious jewels in my possession. I would like to think that this is a dream about artistic richness, not about my acquisitive love for jewellery, but I'm sure that I was thinking about Frida Kahlo before I went to sleep, and that last night's dream is about Frida. I have just returned from Mexico. My first visit in 26 years.

I have complicated feelings about both Frida and Diego. I taught a course on Pre and Post Hispanic Art for years in the mid 1980's (at the then Museum of Mankind and at the University of California) and Diego Rivera was the star of my course on the Mexican muralist movement. This was years before he became an international superhero and long before what is known in Mexico as *Fridamania* started. Of course, now his work has been side-lined by his wife's - a state of affairs that would have appalled him and delighted her. Theirs was a loud, combative, and ultimately rivalrous relationship.

My second book, published in 1994, was about Frida Kahlo and her relationship to Mexico. I spent at least three years of my life devoted to her. My own work as an artist suffered. How could it not? She was a strong, vivid almost lurid presence in my studio. My Amstrad word processor (no home computers then) was festooned with tin votive offerings and choice bits of home spun textiles, folk art and *Mexicanidad*, and a sugar skull and a skeleton riding a bicycle bestrode this antique machine. I surrounded myself with her paintings and I wore the same jewellery she wore, made by the same man who made hers, Victor Fosado. Whilst researching the book I made many trips to Mexico and was welcomed by her devoted students - Arturo Garcia Bustos and Rena Lazo in Oaxaca and her devoted collector Dolores Olmedo in Mexico City - and I felt her close to me. Her friends entertained me and encouraged me. I sensed that I knew her. A kinship. An intimacy. I loved her. She was starting to become a feminist icon, St.

Frida of the Many Wounds, and I felt that I fought for her as a fellow human being. I argued her case in my book with a psychological analysis of her childhood. I argued her case with the Mexican government when they suddenly declared her a national monument, suddenly upping the ante for reproduction rights. I am proud to say that I traded rights for offering my books free to schools. So I felt a sense of - dare I say it - ownership.

Going back to Mexico in 2018 - a rich, wonderful trip that I will write about in a further blog - was a shock. Frida is everywhere. Books. Exhibitions. On children's knapsacks. On wallets. On handbags. On shopping bags. On socks. On Barbie Dolls. On the 500 peso bill. On tortilla packets. The owner of a restaurant in Oaxaca dresses up every night as Frida to serve dinner - fake eyebrows and all. It's totally mad. As mad as Frida.

What would she have made of it all? I can't decide. Part of me thinks that she would have loved it - the fame, the exhibitions (the Victoria and Albert Museum are about to stage a show of her possessions) and the ubiquity of her iconic image. After all, with all her barbaric jewels, crowns of flowers, tribal Tehuantepec dresses and showy outfits she surely asked for attention. But let's be clear - Frida was no Tehuana. She was the well-educated, literary daughter of an Hungarian intellectual. She was acting out Frida as much as the Oaxaqueña restaurateur, because under her vast petticoats Frida was a shy damaged person who hid a tragic soul under this mantle of disguise. She was the first to criticise hypocrisy and commercialism in the art world.

"I'd rather sit on the floor of the market of Toluca and sell tortillas than have anything to do with those artistic bitches."

Now she is literally selling the tortillas.

Robin Richmond