

## **BLOCH'S FOCUS ON FRIDA**

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It was not the kind of greeting on which great friendships are typically built.

"I hate you," Frida Kahlo hissed to fellow artist Lucienne Bloch at a Manhattan dinner party in the early 1930s.

She had just spent the long meal casting dirty looks at her philandering husband Diego Rivera and the pretty young daughter of composer Ernest Bloch. To Kahlo's eye, the two were flirting. In truth, they were absorbed only in provocative talk about art and ideas.

"I was very impressed," Bloch told Kahlo biographer Hayden Herrera many years later. "That was my first contact with Frida and I loved her for it." The two women became close friends, sharing confidences and shouldering each other's pain.

Through those years, Bloch, a self-taught photographer then experimenting with the new format of 35mm, captured their moments together with a series of playful and intimate snapshots. They show a far different Frida than the tortured, often bloody and phantasmagoric self-portraits that define Kahlo's work as a painter.

A sampling of those photos between friends has been assembled for an exhibit, "Lucienne Bloch: Focus on Frida," opening today at the Alinder Gallery in Gualala. The two dozen mounted black and whites will be on display through February.

Bloch, who with husband Stephen Pope Dimitroff embarked on a long career as a fresco muralist using the techniques they learned as assistants to Rivera, spent the last 34 years of her life on the Mendocino coast before her death in 1999 at the age of 90.

In addition to fresco, Bloch mastered an amazing array of media in her life, easily moving from woodblock to lithographs, mosaics to egg tempera, watercolor to glass sculpture.

In the 1930s, while executing the painstaking and vanishing art of fresco for the Works Progress Administration, she also dabbled in photography, a favorite hobby of her famous father. With her new Leica, she chronicled the despair of America's autoworkers during labor strikes and protests as a free-lancer for Life Magazine.

"Lucienne was one of those really fine artists who was able to pick up the camera and really find and communicate some beautiful, exciting things," said gallery owner Jim Alinder. The gallery last showed Bloch's photographic work five years ago. The new exhibit, however, features some previously unseen prints that focus on the many personal faces of Frida, with her tightly coiled braids, heavy jewelry and signature unibrow dancing broken over her dark eyes.

There is the brave face of Frida, holding a Cinzano bottle and looking seductive despite having just chopped off her hair in despair after discovering that Diego had slept with her favorite sister. And there is the pensive, yet coolly defiant face of Frida, posing in front of Diego's unfinished Unity panel at the New Workers School in New York in 1933 -- the hard visages of Stalin and Trotsky hovering directly above her head. The exhibit also includes Bloch's first photo of her new friend, casually reclining in a chair at the Barbizon Plaza Hotel in New York in 1931, a cigarette between her fingers and a just completed self-portrait behind her.

It was Bloch who captured the only photographic record of Rivera's controversial mural at Rockefeller Center, displaying a Marxist utopia and featuring the unmistakable face of Lenin. Before the Rockefellers ordered it destroyed, Bloch smuggled a camera into the center under her skirt and preserved it in a famous shot reprinted in art history books. That important photograph is part of the retrospective, along with Bloch's labor pictures and shots of New York.

The exhibit opens four weeks after the new biopic "Frida," starring Salma Hayek and Alfred Molina as the oddly matched Mexican artists, premiered in the U.S. to largely tepid reviews. Bloch's heirs, chief among them granddaughter and namesake Lucienne Allen of Gualala, eagerly awaited the release of the film to set the stage for another showing of her photographs.

Allen is determined to keep her grandmother's work before the public eye, while elevating her reputation as a gifted artist of remarkable versatility. It's a slow process. A Bloch photo is included in The National Gallery of Art's new photo archives guide. Bloch will be a featured artist in the February issue of Black and White.

"Someday she will be recognized much more than she is now," said Allen, who has spent the last several years promoting her grandmother's work and archiving her material.

That includes numerous journals that have provided important source material for a number of Kahlo biographies, including Herrera's "Frida," from which the new film was adapted. But while Bloch is quoted frequently in the book, she wasn't included in the screenplay, to the disappointment of Allen. Instead, Lucienne was folded into a composite character.

"It was hard to see Frida sitting on a train by herself, worried and with nobody as support when there *was* someone there for support," lamented Allen, referring to a scene in which Kahlo returns alone to Mexico to the bedside of her dying mother. In fact, Bloch accompanied her. In the years before she died Bloch spent hours in the darkroom with Allen, advising her granddaughter as she printed seven binders full of aging negatives.

Buried within the treasure were some 30 images of Frida and Diego during the years of their brief but intense friendship with the Dimitroff's in New York and Detroit from 1931 to 1938.

A mantra of modern photographers shooting with motordrives has long been, "film's cheap," an invitation to not hold back. But Bloch's Depression era work shows forced economy and restraint. While her technical expertise was limited -- she never used a light meter -- she had an artist's eye.

"You can look from frame to frame and see that she composed carefully," said Allen. "There might be only one shot she took that day."