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Unity of Purpose

Photos of Frida Kahlo on display at La Raza

By Victoria Dalkey -- Bee Art Correspondent - *(Published February 16, 2003)*

In 1932, Lucienne Bloch, a young artist, was seated next to Diego Rivera at a dinner party in New York City and monopolized him for the whole evening. After dinner, Bloch recalled in her journal, Frida Kahlo, Rivera's wife, approached her and, with a sharp look, said, "I hate you." The next day Bloch began working as Rivera's assistant. As soon as Kahlo realized she was not trying to seduce her husband, the two women became close friends.

A show of Bloch's photographs of Kahlo alone and with Rivera, on display at La Raza/Galeria Posada, tells the story of two fascinating women -- one world renowned, the other just emerging from the shadows of history.

One face is famous. Bloch gives us intimate glimpses of Kahlo, mischievously biting her beads, flirtatiously winking at the camera, clowning with a doily on her head. The other is new to us. Frida's photo of Bloch shows us a strong and sturdy woman who looks as steady and unflappable as Frida was mercurial and emotional.

The story of Kahlo's tragic life is familiar. The accident that nearly killed her in 1925 and left her in pain for the rest of her life, her tumultuous marriage to Rivera, and her struggle to produce her own eccentric paintings are the subject of a recent movie starring Salma Hayek. But Bloch's story is largely unknown.

Born in Switzerland in 1909, Lucienne Bloch was the youngest child of Ernest Bloch, an internationally known composer and photographer. Talented in many areas, she attended the Ecole National et Superieure des Beaux Arts in Paris, apprenticing at 14 with sculptor Antoine Bourdelle and painter Andre Lhote. In 1929, she designed glass sculpture for the Royal Leerdam glass factory in Holland, and her pioneering work led Frank Lloyd Wright to invite her to teach at his architectural school, Taliesin East.

Instead, she chose to apprentice with Rivera, working on frescoes in Detroit and New York. Forming a close friendship with Rivera's wife, she was with Frida Kahlo when Kahlo had a miscarriage in 1932 and also accompanied Kahlo to Mexico when the artist's mother became ill later that year.

In one photo, Bloch gives us a sad and pensive Kahlo, staring out the window of the train headed for Mexico. In her journal Bloch wrote: "Frida cried in the dark compartment where we will now travel 4 days. This time it was for leaving Diego. It's the first time. And not knowing how her Mother is either -- maybe dying -- made it most horrible for her. She went to sleep all shaking like a little child."

Bloch also offers images of some of Kahlo's most famous paintings from the period. Caught as works in progress are her surreal painting of the miscarriage, "Henry Ford Hospital"; Kahlo's imagined scene of her own birth with her adult head emerging from the womb of a hooded female figure; and a painting of Kahlo's dress hanging halfway between Mexico and the United States with the Statue of Liberty in the background.

As Kahlo's close friend and confidante, Bloch spent many hours with the artist, comforting her and trying to cheer her up by taking her to see "Congorilla" movies. Several shots show Kahlo at the Barbizon Plaza Hotel, where the Rivera's stayed in New York.

Frida had a love affair with the camera and always presented herself dramatically, often staring at the viewer challengingly or coquettishly. Of one saucy image, Bloch wrote: "We had lunch with Georgia O'Keefe and drank Tequila, that tough Mexican drink, and went to say goodbye to Stieglitz and sang in the toilets there ... Frida in her dainty Mexican costume. What a sight!"

An accomplished photographer, Bloch took many photos of Rivera and Kahlo together. She gives us a charming shot of the pair kissing and another of them at Jones Beach on Long Island, where Kahlo partakes of an ice cream cone as Rivera looks on. Another picture captures Rivera sleeping as Kahlo watches over him in a park where they had had a picnic.

Bloch writes about that day: "We took cold chicken in a little basket and went to Belle Isle dragging Diego with us at the last instant. It did him good to go out. He was so surprised at the beauty of the trees when lying down in the grass. He says trees are ugly and nature is hokum but he can't help admiring it when he's in it."

She also took the only existing shots of Rivera's controversial mural at Rockefeller Center, which was destroyed in 1933. Bloch, a committed Marxist at the time, was one of the people close to Rivera who urged him to leave an image of Lenin in the mural after Nelson Rockefeller ordered him to replace it with an imaginary character.

Bloch recalled: "I made photos though it was absolutely forbidden. I had my camera in my pocketbook and then transferred it to my overalls ... and took photos with at least 20 detectives walking suspiciously around."

Other photos record a recapitulation of the Lenin image -- surrounded by Marx, Trotsky, Stalin and other heroes of the Russian Revolution -- that Rivera painted for the New Worker's School in New York. One stunning shot captures Frida in front of the unfinished Unity Panel, as it was called.

Bloch later married one of Rivera's chief plasterers, Stephen Pope Dimitroff, and Kahlo was the godmother of their first child. Bloch caught Kahlo and her godson in a charming shot in which Kahlo looks genuinely happy.

After her association with Kahlo tapered off, Bloch, with Dimitroff, went on to create fresco murals all over the United States. She worked for the Works Progress Administration from 1935 to 1939 and also was employed as a freelance photographer for Life magazine, recording the conditions of autoworkers during labor strikes and protests that occurred during the formation of the automobile workers unions.

In all, Bloch created nearly 50 murals for religious institutions, schools, hospitals and businesses and also worked in other media, including woodblock prints, mosaics, wood and glass sculpture and lithography. Several of her original prints and drawings are included in the show.

Lucienne Bloch died in 1999 at the age of 90 on her small farm in the Mendocino County town of Gualala. Her granddaughter, Lucienne Allen, is finishing the autobiography they had been working on together for nearly 10 years.

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