

Frida Kahlo & Lucienne Bloch: Friendship & Fuerza

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In 1935 Frida Kahlo, found out that her husband, the famous Mexican muralist, Diego Rivera, was having an affair with her sister. In a fit of rage she chopped off her long black hair which Rivera loved, just to spite him. Along with her hair she shed her trademark Mexican frilly skirts for more masculine Western attire. Then she did what most women would do. She went to a friend for comfort.

That friend was Lucienne Bloch, an artist and assistant to Rivera. Frida showed up at Bloch's house with her newly shorn hair, picked up a Cinzano bottle and pointed at it playfully, as if to drown her sorrows. In that instant Bloch pulled out her camera and snapped a photo of Frida melancholic as always, but undefeated. According to Bloch: "The Cinzano bottle she holds, represents the unborn child she could never give him." This is the Frida I love. The Frida who has become an icon to women all over. Frida the Mexicana who did not let a crippling bus accident at sixteen years old deter her from expressing herself through those searing self-portraits which chronicled her physical and psychological pain, through thirty-two operations and that tempestuous relationship with Rivera. Fiery Frida, who found a way to rise above it and laugh at the situation and at herself, despite it all.

Last fall, purely by accident, or perhaps by some intervention of *destino* (destiny) I happened upon this photograph of Kahlo, the intriguing story of the woman behind the lens, Lucienne Bloch, and the friendship that bound them.

I have been a Frida fan for a long time, but the last thing on my mind, when I planned my weekend vacation to Gualala last fall was Frida Kahlo. Gualala is a sleepy little coastal town four hours north of San Francisco. To get there you must follow the endlessly winding road of Highway One, you must battle motion sickness, accept that you will get no reception on your cell phone, and watch out for wandering cows and sheep. In short, Gualala is no cultural Mecca. Against my better judgement my friends dragged me into a small grey windowless building, the town gallery. Inside I imagined trite pictures of cows, and sunsets. But walking to the back of the three room gallery, I found myself standing in front of a black and white photo of Frida sitting smugly in front of one of Rivera's controversial depictions of Lenin, in the unfinished Unity panel at the New Workers' School (now The New School For Social Research) in New York City. I was sure that it had to be a poster, a copy, anything but the real thing. But Paul Kozal, an accomplished photographer, who works at the gallery assured me that indeed it was an original. The Alinder gallery had come to exhibit this photograph, among others, because Lucienne Bloch, the photographer in question, had moved to Gualala later in her life. She lived there with her family until her death in 1999. Kozal remembered developing photos in the darkroom with her, where he heard her recount the stories behind each one first hand. He then pulled out, one after another, a stunning series of photos of Kahlo and Rivera, and began to regale me with stories. I was mesmerized.

Looking at Bloch's photographs was like getting a secret glimpse into a side of Frida not shown in other photos, or revealed in her own self-portraits. Certainly Frida was always aware of the camera, and faced it head on- as she faced most of her life, yet as Kozal pointed out, Bloch's photos are more candid than most:

"...a lot of the portraits you see...of Frida...they're very posed and...some of them...look like they are almost like her paintings, where Lucienne [Bloch] captured... a happy side, and a playful [side] and a close friendship side to her."

I saw this unmasked Frida for the first time in: "Frida Monkeyshining," where she is caught fooling around for the camera with a lampshade on her head; "Frida Biting Her Necklace", where she

seductively holds a dangling silver necklace between her parted lips; and “Frida Winking” which shows her coyly flirting with the viewer. If I wanted to learn more, Kozal suggested I go to the source: Bloch's granddaughter, and namesake, Lucienne Allen, who is currently writing a book about her grandmother's life, and compiling a book of photographs.

Unable to stop thinking about Bloch's photographs I braved the roads to Gualala once more in order to meet Allen. I expected something more momentous. A fancy house. A drumroll. Something. But everything about Allen exuded directness and simplicity, qualities it seems, she learned from her grandmother. An unpretentious, down to earth woman with long black hair that travels all the way down to her hips, Allen was dressed casually and wore no make-up. She had unmanicured eyebrows that Frida would have been proud of. We met in her office inside the house that her grandmother lived and died in, a small simple country home brimming over with photographs, drawings, books, wooden sculptures and knickknacks.

Allen is only thirty years old, but she was selected to carry on her grandmother's legacy because she is the child who was closest to her. Allen was brought up under Bloch's influence on a country property which held three houses: her mother's house, her grandmother's house and now her own home, where she lives with her husband David Allen and their four children.

Allen began assisting Bloch with her autobiography when she was only sixteen years old. Later it was Allen's husband David, an amateur photographer himself, who realized Bloch's unrecognized photographic talent and encouraged Allen to help him build a darkroom. They began sifting through forgotten cigar boxes full of negatives, reprinting photographs, salvaging vintage prints and reprinting new photographs off forgotten negatives, learning how to mat each photo, as well as beginning to spread the word to galleries and art dealers. It was the Alinder Gallery, owned by Jim and Mary Alinder, that held Bloch's first photography retrospective in 1997, including the Kahlo/Rivera photos, as well as her striking photos of the 1930s Labor Movement, and some more personal but equally vivid works. While in the darkroom Bloch recounted the stories behind each photograph. Now Allen is finally putting those words down on paper, in order to finish the autobiography her grandmother began, and reveal to the world what a talented photographer, artist and woman her grandmother was.

Allen wore a pair Kahlo's earrings (given to Bloch as a gift) to school in the eighth grade until they went out of fashion. “I didn't feel that wearing Frida's earrings was a big deal,” she stated. When I asked if I could see them it took her a moment to remember where they were! Finally, she pulled out a dusty cigar box and extracted an unremarkable pair of silver dangling earrings in the shape of a teardrop, bearing a small lapis stone at the bottom. As I held them in my hand I had trouble grasping the fact that these simple earrings belonged to such a legend and that I was actually touching them. Her family also possesses the bead necklace which Kahlo wore in her self-portrait “Frida at the Barbizon Plaza Hotel,” now the image on the Frida Kahlo stamps, but this one was safely tucked away so I didn't get to see it.

Allen told me that Bloch grew up surrounded by the great intellectuals of her day, which explained her lack of interest in fame or power. Bloch's father, Ernest Bloch, was a renowned Swiss Composer as well as a talented photographer himself. In fact, Bloch was so unfazed by famous people that when Madonna came to research the part of Frida for the movie she hoped to star in, Bloch served her frozen pizza which Madonna, joking later, called “ca-ca,” (in an imitation of Kahlo's language.)

Intrigued by Bloch's connection with Kahlo I kept wondering why Bloch is not better known. Apparently Bloch has been known in elite circles of American Art connoisseurs of the 1930s, primarily as an artist, and muralist but not as a photographer. She herself saw her photography more as a hobby than a profession. And with the growing popularity of Kahlo more and more people became aware of Bloch as a “friend” of the Riveras. But in speaking with Allen I

discovered that Bloch was actually much more than that. In Kozal's view: "I think she's an undiscovered artist and I think she needs to be brought to light..." Bloch was a remarkably talented photographer, muralist and artist in her own right, who was inspired and shaped in many ways personally, politically and artistically by the crossing of paths with these two great Latino figures.

Bloch met Kahlo at a high society party in New York City, in 1931. They were both in their early twenties. The world was in the midst of the Great Depression and both women were appalled by the decadence of the rich in face of the poverty facing the rest of society. Rivera sought to create left wing political art accessible to all. Bloch was seated next to Rivera. Allen recounted that Bloch was fascinated by Rivera's revival of mural painting, combined with his interest in industrialization, so she boldly said to Rivera: "I'd love to grind your colors." But when Kahlo noticed Bloch immersed in conversation with her husband, famous for his murals and infamous for his infidelity, she became incensed. Hayden Herrera writes in her Biography of Frida Kahlo, that after dinner Frida strode up to Bloch and announced: "I hate you." To Lucienne Bloch, tired of society's strict propriety, this was a refreshing change. Allen explained: "...she'd been dealing with this bourgeois, stuffy, flatten your chest and wear your skirts down below your waistline...she was sick of it...to have someone real sit there and give their opinion..." that was something. Bloch wrote in her diary: "I was very impressed...and I loved her for it." From this moment on the friendship between these two strong, creative and passionate women was sparked. Over the course of the next three years Bloch met her future husband, absorbed Rivera's fresco techniques, forged a bond with Kahlo, and took some forty-five photographs documenting their time together over this short but formative period.

They were drawn together by a mutual scorn for social traditions which dictated how women were supposed to behave. As Allen stated, like Kahlo, Bloch was not one to "stay within the lines..." "They drank Tequila and sang in the streets," recalled Allen. When the elevator boys at the Barbizon hotel snubbed Frida, "...she called one of them 'a son of a bitch,'" wrote Bloch, who found it "refreshing to finally be around someone who will speak their mind and not give a damn about the consequences!"

Bloch and Kahlo were also connected by left wing politics. Kahlo went on to have an affair with Leon Trotsky. Bloch painted protest signs for the labor strikes and took a series of photos documenting these rallies, which were later portrayed in Rivera's murals as well as Bloch's. Bloch and Kahlo stood firmly behind Rivera during the now famous incident at Rockefeller center when Rivera's anti-Capitalistic politics caused him to lose his wealthy sponsor, Nelson Rockefeller. It was 1933 when Rockefeller demanded that Rivera stop working on his commissioned mural at Rockefeller Center in New York City, because it was too pro-Communist, including the offending item: a picture of Lenin's head at the helm of a new world order. Security guards were brought in. The mural was covered and the windows were whitewashed so no one could see in. Unwilling to give up without a fight, Bloch sneaked into the RCA building past the security guards with a camera hidden inside her blouse. While Kahlo distracted the guards Bloch snapped photos, creating the only existing record of the mural, which was torn down one year later. (Rivera recreated this mural later in Mexico City with a few changes, and he used Rockefeller's dismissal check to do more anti-establishment, pro-communist murals at The New School, the same mural pictured in the photo of Frida in front of Lenin's portrait.)

Typical of her independent spirit, Bloch also lived with her future husband, Stephen Pope Dimitroff, before such things were deemed acceptable. She pursued her art with zeal, unwilling to be only a mother and wife at a time when women did not traditionally work. It is these qualities which probably made her friendship with Kahlo natural. These two women shared an unwillingness to conform, left-wing politics, a passion for art and for life.

Bloch and Kahlo were also connected by similar family themes. If Kahlo struggled with Rivera's constant betrayals, Bloch grew up in a house where her mercurial father brought his mistresses to the dinner table. So when Rivera let loose his explosive temper, or betrayed Kahlo for other women, Bloch was not shocked the way some women might have been. Nor was she shocked by Frida's bisexuality. And according to Allen, Bloch's friendship with Frida was special, because she was one of the few women friends who had not slept with either Kahlo or Rivera. When Kahlo had a miscarriage in Detroit (sadly one of many), Frida told Bloch, "I need you to stay with Diego and take care of him." According to Allen, "My grandmother felt so proud that Frida trusted her, because she knew that was a thorn in Frida's side..."

Kahlo and Bloch also had difficult relationships with their mothers. If they were both powerful women in the end, it seems they came into their own power slowly, perhaps due to an initial insecurity caused by growing up with critical mothers. Yet it seems that Kahlo and Bloch gave each other the encouragement that their mothers were not able to give. Bloch continually strove to please her mother, who told her "you shouldn't draw because you'll never be any good..." said Allen. Herrera writes that Kahlo similarly had "ambivalent" feelings toward her own mother, once describing her as "cruel." So when Kahlo told Bloch that she was a good artist she was thrilled, and wrote in her diary that she was especially proud "...because it's Frida's judgement and she has such an intense sense of the beautiful." This boosted Bloch's morale at a crucial point in her life.

Allen made no attempt to idealize Kahlo or Bloch as some might expect. She was strikingly honest and seemed able to discuss the complexities of both women without romanticizing them. While Kahlo and Bloch were both independent and creative women, neither of them were easy women. Allen remembered her grandmother telling her that while they worked on lithographs together Frida was moody and distant, and at times hurt Bloch's feelings. But once it was over it was over. Bloch wrote, "She has such intense moods. When she is blue she looks so hopelessly dejected, and when she laughs it's the very extreme."

In addition, as is evident in her art and in her diaries Kahlo was intensely man-focused. It is interesting she has become a heroine despite her dramatically anti-feminist obsession with a man who treated her badly. Bloch wrote, "Frida actually cried and told me the hardships of her life with Diego. How irregular and different it is from what she was used to, and how, if she holds her own, he is ready to say, 'You don't love me!'" Sure she wasn't this pillar of perfect feminine strength. But isn't that what we love about her, the fact that she wasn't boring and perfect?

In contrast, Bloch had a much less sentimental view in regard to men, something which may have served as a good balance for Frida's melodramatic view of the world, and men in particular. Bloch's message to her daughter (Allen's mother, Sita Milchev) and granddaughter (Allen) about men was more practical than sentimental, "Men are like shoes, you try them on 'til you find one that fits." Perhaps just the kind of wisdom that Frida needed to hear on that day when she chopped her hair off?

Interestingly Bloch was able to break her family cycle of unreliable and tempestuous men in the union with her husband Dimitroff, a man who according to Allen, was a virgin when he married her and remained faithful for sixty-five years.

"...he swung me on my overalls on 6th and 23rd street and I'll never feel the same about that street again," wrote Bloch of her meeting with Dimitroff, the Chief plasterer for Rivera on the RCA mural. They fell in love while working on this mural, lived together, and eventually married. Throughout their marriage they worked as a team with Bloch as painter and Dimitroff as plasterer on countless murals. They continued to teach, and at the age of 76 Bloch was still active returning with Dimitroff to clean Rivera's mural at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

Despite her incredible talent, Kahlo was, surprisingly enough, not terribly disciplined as an artist. In contrast, Allen described Bloch as incredibly driven, swimming in her cold pool each day,

“naked save only her swimmers cap” and working on art projects every day of her life up until her death at the age of 90. Rivera urged Bloch to encourage Kahlo to work when Kahlo got depressed. Just as Kahlo’s belief in Bloch’s talents fueled Bloch, Bloch was equally able to give back to Kahlo, in pushing her to create regularly, “Frida wants schedules and to do things like in school but by the time she must get to action something always happens and she feels her day broken up,” wrote Bloch.

Bloch’s disciplined nature, which made her a great artist may not have made her the best mother. I went to talk with her daughter Sita Milchev (Allen’s mother), at The Food Company where she now works. Milchev is a short, warm, grey haired woman with bright blue eyes. According to Milchev, her mother “...was brought up with you don’t praise a child...so I was always unsure, even when I got scholarships [to The Julliard School of Music.]” Milchev now sings in local productions, but she gave up her singing career to raise her children. She is however also writing her own autobiography. Like her own mother, Bloch never learned how to give her children the support they desperately needed. But she was in Allen’s estimation a better grandmother than she was a mother. Allen seemed to have inherited her grandmother’s practical attitude and has been able to forgive the flaws and appreciate the good qualities.

While Bloch’s tough exterior may have made her a less-than-perfect mother, it may be just this quality which made her a crucial support to Frida in times of crisis. Bloch remained steadily by Kahlo’s side during a number of difficult moments. When Kahlo’s mother became ill and subsequently died Bloch traveled with her to Mexico on the train. Never without a camera around her neck Bloch captured a somber Frida staring out the train window with her simple Brownie camera. The image is somewhat blurred, due to the quality of the camera and the negative, but it seems appropriately consistent with Frida’s mood. Like Kahlo, Bloch never shied away from photographing the difficult times along with the happier ones and clearly Kahlo was not an unwilling subject.

While Rivera was in Detroit working at the Detroit Institute of Art he asked Bloch to come live with them to keep Kahlo company so she would not get so blue. Bloch stayed with them for almost half a year, sleeping on the Murphy bed in the living room and was there when Kahlo had a miscarriage. Frida agonized over not being able to have a baby due to her physical injuries, and she painted this in all its ugliness in her work: “Henry Ford Hospital.” In an attempt to cheer her up Bloch, revealing her own sense of humor, arrived at the hospital with a fake telegram from Henry Ford, saying “ I hope you get better,” which made Kahlo laugh so hard the fetus was spontaneously expelled, which then made her weep profusely.

While Bloch initially struggled to conceive as well, she and Dimitroff eventually went on to have three children. Allen recounted that when Bloch was told by doctors she might be bearing twins, in acknowledgement of Kahlo’s longing for children she said to her: “If I do have twins, I’ll give you one.” She did not have twins, but Frida became the godmother to her first born. The last photo Bloch ever took of Frida was with the baby in her arms, and an unrehearsed smile on Frida’s face. In a letter to Bloch in 1932, Kahlo using her nickname for Bloch wrote: “Dear Lucetecrue, I send you a big, big, big kiss on your magnificent and charming behind!” Their friendship lasted seven years, and Bloch said of it: “Nor have I had finer company than Diego and Frida. It is the richest friendship I have ever had.”

The two women drifted apart in 1938 when Bloch and Dimitroff moved to Flint, Michigan and Frida returned to Mexico. Allen suggested that the business of raising a family along with the distance may have caused them to lose contact. Nevertheless, what Bloch learned from Kahlo and Rivera continued to impact her work. Kahlo once said to Bloch: “You should paint big things for if you paint small your art will always be small.” A statement which reveals more about Kahlo’s own modesty, since she always painted small, (compared to Rivera’s murals) and yet her canvases are anything but “small.” Bloch, however, did take Kahlo’s advice and went on to paint approximately fifty murals with her husband Dimitroff as her partner. Her second mural was at a women’s detention center, commissioned by the Works Progress Administration, a result of the

New Deal. The New York Evening Journal protested "...the most luxurious prison in the world, is going to be made even more luxurious...at a cost of many thousands of dollars of taxpayers' money..." (1935) But as Allen stated, Bloch refused to do what others had done and "paint pretty pictures of Florida." Instead she asked the prisoners what they wanted to see. The result was children harmoniously playing together, including different races of children planting a flower, a bold image at a time when segregation still prevailed. Like Rivera, Bloch's art was often political. Rivera believed art should go on walls so it would be accessible to all, not just the elite who could afford to visit museums and pay for expensive portraits. Bloch continued in his footsteps. And while she learned much of her technique from Rivera, from Kahlo she may have learned the confidence which allowed her to continue on her own, creating her own unique style. Bloch's murals still exist in California, New York, Michigan, Kentucky, Wyoming, Washington State and New Hampshire.

When I asked Allen what she learned from her grandmother she said: "To be able to see beauty in everything..." For Bloch everything in life was a potential work of art from blackberry roots to pickle jars. And "... there is no such thing as a mistake. When I used to sit coloring...over there and I'd ask for an eraser she would say, 'No, you don't need to erase it. What can you make from that?' I wonder if Bloch tried to teach the self-critical Kahlo this lesson when she rescued Kahlo's discarded fresco which would later sit above her telephone.

Their friendship had a lasting impact, leaving us with the legacy of two fiercely independent spirits, who created artwork that continues to resonate today. Kahlo's art revealed her own inner-turmoil and is popular today perhaps because we recognize in it our own personal struggles. Bloch's photographs revealed her subjects. She allowed us into secret moments with Frida: Frida laughing, Frida kissing Rivera, and Frida in mourning. And in revealing Frida, Bloch also reveals to us her own sensitivity as an artist, as well as the power of a friendship that allowed for such intimacy.

I now have that photograph of Frida with her Cinzano bottle and her cropped hair staring out at me above my desk, and whenever I feel like life is too hard Frida's fierce gaze pushes me to keep on going. But now I also think of Bloch when I see this photo, and I remember that friendship between women can transform us, sustain us, and lead us to greatness.

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