
***The Manifesto
of Magdalena Carmen***

Reflection Statement

My intention in *The Manifesto of Magdalena Carmen* was to critique the contemporary experience of the creative arts, exploring how our focus on the creative persona has elevated the importance of the *artist* over the *art*, thereby undermining both the artist's intentions and the transformative value of imagination and the creative process. Noting the overt 'cult of personality' that pervades the visual arts in particular, I chose to develop this argument through a curator's search for revelations to 'spice-up' a blockbuster exhibition of 'larger-than-life' Mexican painter, Frida Kahlo. Kahlo's complex and often self-contradictory life also suited my further purpose of highlighting the pitfalls of relying on retrospectively-constructed narratives of artists' lives to draw oversimplified, often misleading parallels between the life and the work of the artist. While *Manifesto* is intended for readers interested in critiquing the creative process generally, Art Gallery NSW's supporters' magazine, *Look*¹, which features exhibition reviews and creative contributions, seemed an appropriate choice, given my specific subject. As the Gallery is currently staging a Kahlo retrospective, the self-referential quirkiness of *reading* a story about a Kahlo exhibition while *visiting* a Kahlo exhibition also created the opportunity to use metafictional devices to present this familiar subject matter in a humorous and novel way.

¹ *Look*, Art Gallery Society of New South Wales, Sydney.

Several texts studied in Senior English proved remarkably pertinent to the development of the work. The parable of cosmic continuity in Ang Lee's *Life of Pi*², studied in Advanced English, provided an excellent starting point for accessing the fundamentally anti-dualist Mexican psyche, while Eliot's expression of the yearning for authentic experience in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"³ helped articulate Frances' frustration that authenticity necessarily evades those who consciously seek it. My Extension 1 study of Plath⁴ (whose confessional work resonates with Kahlo's) helped shape my understanding that powerful art transcends the personal, proving that great works are more than the sum of the individual experiences that inform them.

To write convincingly for my intended audience necessitated detailed knowledge of Kahlo, a daunting task given the number of texts devoted to her life and work⁵. I soon discovered, in much of this material, a repetitive set of Kahlo facts and anecdotes sourced from Hayden Herrera's factual biography⁶, a work I found invaluable for checking specific details and chronology. Herrera's work includes many of Kahlo's letters, revealing a chameleon-like persona with whom I found myself 'falling in and out of

² Lee, Ang (dir) 2012, *Life of Pi*, motion picture, 20th Century Fox, Los Angeles.

³ Eliot, T.S. (1954), *Selected Poems*, Faber Paper covered Editions, London.

⁴ Plath, Sylvia (1965), *Ariel*, Faber Modern Classics, London.

⁵ When I last checked, there were 87 published works on Kahlo.

⁶ Herrera, Hayden (1983), *Frida: a biography of Frida Kahlo*, Harper Collins, New York.

love'. I ultimately wove this ambivalence into the fictional Hartshaw's search for the 'real' Kahlo.

I also consulted several fictional accounts of Kahlo⁷ – and critiques of them⁸. This comparative study assisted my appropriation of the lexicon of academic analysis, further supplemented by close study of reviews of Kahlo exhibitions⁹ – which I needed to authenticate Frances' oeuvre for my informed audience – as in “Within the patriarchal construct of the Western artistic canon, women are admitted by exception”. The comparative study also exposed the pitfalls of heavy-handed management of relevant context – “lobbing history at us” as Myerson¹⁰ describes Delahunt's approach¹¹. Given the probable knowledge of my readers, it was imperative I present facts accurately but without condescendingly

⁷ A number of fictionalised biographies were considered including:

Hagenbeck, F.G. (2012), *The Secret book of Frida Kahlo: A Novel*, Atria Books, New York
Mujica, Barbara (2001), *Frida: a novel of Frida Kahlo*, The Overlook Press, New York.
Braverman, Kate (2002), *The Incantation of Frida K.*, Seven Stories, New York.

⁸ A number of reviews were consulted including:

Ahmed, F. (2002), “Fragments of an autumn woman”, *Times Literary Supplement*, December 13.
Haas, Lidija (2009), “A bright liquid life”, *Times Literary Supplement*, November 13.

⁹ These included:

Mencimer, Stephanie (2002) “The trouble with Frida Kahlo” *Washington Monthly*, June 15.
McNeil, Jean (2005) “Everything and all at once” *Times Literary Supplement*, June 24.

¹⁰ Myerson, Julie (2001), “Research Junkie”, *The Guardian*, April 21.

¹¹ Delahunt, Meaghan (2001), *In the Blue House*, Bloomsbury, London.

“lobbing” them. From Kingsolver’s *Lacuna*¹² I noted the use of simulated newspaper articles, letters and reviews, deliberately placed outside the narrative flow, thereby delivering context and authenticity through the indirect subtlety of montage. I saw how Ondaatje’s *Coming Through Slaughter* developed this into edgy ‘collaging’ of multiple perspectives. While I appreciated the importance of forward momentum in the short story form,¹³ I persisted with some ‘floating’ of alternative voices around Frances’ non-omniscient narration. I hoped this would illustrate obliquely – “showing rather than telling”, as Jan Schill¹⁴ advises – the differences between the multidimensionality of real life and the linearity of retrospective analyses of it. I was also encouraged in this approach by Kate Grenville’s suggestion that multiple voices can yield “more interesting, more dramatic”¹⁵ storytelling.

These unassimilated alternative perspectives necessitated ‘ventriloquising’ several ‘voices’ for which I consulted various sources. The unintegrated, but juxtaposed, letters of Sylvia Ageloff were used to

¹² Kingsolver, Barbara (2009), *The Lacuna*, Faber and Faber, London.

¹³ The distinction between the importance of narrative progression in the short story and the accommodation of more contemplative and ambiguous structures in the novel is outlined in a number of ‘how to’ guides, including: Boulter, A. (2007), *Writing fiction: creative and critical approaches*, Palgrave Macmillan, London. p. 38.

¹⁴ Schill, Jan (2010), *Constructing a concept-based story*, Sapientia Publishing, Sydney. p. 54.

¹⁵ Grenville, Kate (2010) *The Writing Book: a practical guide for fiction writers*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney. p. 72.

develop the dramatic irony in Frances' insistence on a "logical explanation" with which her fragmentary perspective of the past would "fit". No letters from university-educated Sylvia, Trotsky's real-life typist, have been published, so I borrowed her 'voice' – "Please write me soon, simply dying to hear the latest ruckus at Radcliffe" from the dialogue of Mary McCarthy's contemporaneous Vassar graduates in *The Group*¹⁶. The exacting, understated voice of Natalya Sedova – "In Moscow a gun ... may be fired into one's own temple – if alternative options are exhausted", whose centrality Frances ironically overlooks, I developed from statements such as "We cannot return after these experiences to the former simplicity" in the real Sedova's letters¹⁷.

The acknowledgement that life, unlike art has no linear narrative, which is central to the purpose of the work, is woven through the "*el monstruo*" metaphor – an expression of Mexico City's geographic "grappling of the isthmus" and a recurring motif for the cosmic continuity by which "lives intersect, diverting in a labyrinthine network". This development of Mexico City as both a setting and a paradoxical character – expressed for example, in the juxtaposing "magnolia scent cut by diesel fumes", was

¹⁶ McCarthy, Mary (1954) *The Group* Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London. p. 334.

¹⁷ Sedova, Natalya, extracts from various letter 1930-1939 in Volkov, Vladimir (2003) "The letters of Natalya Sedova to Leon Trotsky" *World Socialist Website*, July 1. viewed online at <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2003/07/sedv-j01.html>

inspired by the olfactory evocations of Catriona Rainsford's Mexican travelogue¹⁸ ("lime-spiced acrid smoke), while the violent black humour of "With only three corpses in the morgue in need of heads, the hunt is on for more bodies" drew from Lucy Neville's¹⁹ depiction of Mexico's fatalistic attitude to the drug cartels – "permanently-positioned gunmen account for the fabulously low prices". Rainsford also introduced me to Octavio Paz, whose poetry²⁰ provides a perfect introduction to Frances' contemplation of Kahlo's work, and evokes the contrasts and contradictions at the exotic heart of my story.

These contradictions are also at the heart of Mexico's predominant literary tradition, magical realism²¹, the obvious form through which to explore the ambiguities of Kahlo and her milieu. The central technique of the genre is, as Salman Rushdie explains, letting "impossible things happen quite plausibly"²² as in Fuentes' *Chac Mool*, where a statue's ability to "grow hair on his arms" is less disturbing than the narrator's

¹⁸ Rainsford, Catriona (2013), *Urban Circus: Travels with Mexico's Malabaristas*, Bradt, London. p.208.

¹⁹ Neville, Lucy (2011), *Oh! Mexico!* Allen and Unwin, Sydney. p. 27.

²⁰ Paz, Octavio (1984), "Between Coming and Going" *Selected Poems*, New Directions Publishing, New York. p. 14.

²¹ Baumann, Harriet (2015) "Magical realism has become almost synonymous with Latin American short fiction." *The Latin American Short Story - A Cultural Traditions*, Yale New Haven Teachers' Institute, New Haven. p.14.

²² Salman Rushdie as quoted in Kakutani, Michio (1989) "Critic's notebook; telling truth through fantasy: Rushdie's Magic Realism, *New York Times on the Web*, February 24. viewed online

<https://www.nytimes.com/books/99/04/18/specials/rushdie-realism.html>

trivial “issuing of an unauthorised purchase order.”²³ Having researched the form through wide reading of short stories²⁴ and critical analyses of them²⁵, I developed my characterisation of Diego Rivera as the central expression of my adaptation of magical realist conventions. Rivera, who died in 1957, appears at Coyoacán McDonalds in 2015, chatting casually with Frances who “refuses to share [her] over-salted fries”, and inverts the reader’s assumptions about ‘truth’. The genre’s mastery of metafictional devices²⁶ also lent itself to the self-referential scenario of the fictional and actual Kahlo exhibitions coinciding. Studying such self-conscious devices as Marquez’s framing narrative – “On the day they were going to kill him,

²³ Fuentes, Carlos (1954) *Chac Mool*, translated into English by Jonah Katz and reproduced in full at <http://www.web.mit.edu>

²⁴ These included:

Marquez, Gabriel Garcia (1972 English trans) *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings* translated into English by Gregory Rabassa and reproduced in full at <http://www.ndsu.edu>

(1970 English trans) *One hundred years of solitude* translated into English by Gregory Rabassa, Penguin Books, Melbourne.

(1982) *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* translated into English by Gregory Rabassa, Viking Books, London.

Rushdie, Salman (1994) *East West*, Jonathan Cape, London.

Cortazar, Julio (1956) *Axolotl* reproduced in full at <http://www.southerncrossreview.org>

Fuentes, (1954), *Ibid*.

²⁵ These included:

Warnes, Christopher (2005) “Naturalizing the supernatural: faith, irreverence and magical realism”, *Literature Compass* 2, 20c, 106.

Faris, Wendy (2004) *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical realism and the remystification of narrative* Vanderbilt Press, Nashville.

²⁶ Warnes, (2005) *Ibid*. “Metafictional contrivance is a natural partner for magical realism. Consider, for example, how many magical realist stories employ the metafictional framing device of “beginning at the end”. p. 6.

Santiago Nasar got up early”²⁷ – I constructed the story’s metafictional self-awareness, as in Diego’s “maybe I overdo the *cempazuchitl* symbolism”.

This dramatic juxtaposition of the fantastical and mundane was also appropriate for the ‘voice’ of Rivera, whose malapropistic ‘Spanglish’ – “You’re the Shylock Holmes of womans!”, and indomitable ego – “It is mostly about me – which is very good” evoke his egotistical and colourful character and provide important insight into the Mexican psyche. This style was less suited to the restrained, wryly sceptical Frances for whom I emulated the more understated satirical tone of Hilary Mantel’s *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher*,²⁸ whose very English narrator archly offers “refreshments” as Thatcher’s hitman assembles his weapon. This tone is emulated in Frances’ acerbic put-downs of Diego – “They sell fridge magnets more revelatory than that” and post-modern wit – “even the ghosts here lack authenticity.” Diego and Frances’ sparring provides the structure through which the philosophical intentions of the work are articulated, their final argument forming the work’s dramatic climax as Diego pronounces that when “shit happens” it should be used to fertilise creativity, not for “chemical analysis”. Toltecatl, too, who started life as a mechanical necessity of the plot, also developed as an unpredictably

²⁷ Marquez (1982) *Ibid.* p.4.

²⁸ Mantel, Hilary (2014) *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher*, Fourth Estate, London. p. 277.

insightful character, adding humour and thematic reinforcement – “I’m thinking ... that actually, it is *art*.” I followed Bradbury’s advice to “sharpen quirks and characteristics [to] make them memorable”²⁹, by featuring Toltecatl’s idiosyncratic use of “actually” and entertaining non-sequiturs – “Martinez cleared [Frida’s papers] and actually now we get excellent internet connectivity”.

While I have researched and consulted widely in the creation of *Manifesto*, I have also followed Carmel Bird’s³⁰ somewhat contradictory advice to “trust [my] instincts”, using my natural penchant for dry humour to engage the reader while retaining a degree of what I believe is appropriate ambiguity in the resolution of the philosophical content of the work. I hope that by book-ending the story with Stevenson’s “life is ... illogical, abrupt ... art is finite, self-contained”³¹ and Frances’ new-found appreciation that “truth may be stranger than fiction, but fiction is infinitely more satisfying” I leave the reader with the paradoxical awareness that ‘truth’ is best appreciated when transformed and experienced through a work of fiction – a work of art. The imaginative process not only creates art but confers meaning on life.

²⁹ Malcolm Bradbury in Bell, Julia (2001) *The Creative Writing Coursebook*, Macmillan, London. p. 122.

³⁰ Bird, Carmel (1996) *Dear Writer: the classic guide to writing fiction*, Vintage, Sydney. p. 58.

³¹ Stevenson, R. L. “A humble remonstrance” from Norquay, Glenda (1999) *R.L. Stevenson on Fiction: An Anthology of Literary and Critical Essays*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh. p. 5.