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An ideal addition: Murals and Mexican Modernism

The best part of "Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Mexican Modernism" is in the museum's Schnitzer Sculpture Court, before you enter the exhibition.

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Installation view of "Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Mexican Modernism" at the Portland Art Museum.

We're not special. "Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Mexican Modernism"

(<https://www.orartswatch.org/frida-kahlo-off-the-conveyer-belt/>) – the big show that's at the Portland Art Museum through June 5th – is a traveling show. The current iteration has been circulating around the U.S. since at least 2018, and similar shows have circulated previously. I've heard from people who have seen this show in Seattle, Albuquerque, and Nashville. From Portland, Frida and friends will venture to Tulsa to open in July. Judging by the throngs of visitors, there is no issue in getting people through the door. School programs seem to be in a particularly full swing after the pandemic lull.

There is, however, something special happening at PAM as part of this exhibition. It isn't among the paintings, prints, photographs, or recreated costumes, but instead in the atrium (Schnitzer Sculpture Court) before you enter the exhibition: two murals (more accurately, large-scale paintings) that were painted live, on site, for the purpose of the exhibition, one helmed by Hector Hernandez and one executed by the collective Ideal PDX. An installation of clothing (a "fashion pop-up") by the collaborative duo Wild Woman rounds out the space.

The Schnitzer Sculpture Court has been variously employed in major PAM exhibitions. In some exhibitions, it is used as space continuous with the rest of the exhibition (the car show (<https://www.orartswatch.org/fast-wheels-modernist-dreams/>), the Laika show (<https://portlandartmuseum.org/exhibitions/animating-life/>), even the Rodin show (http://www.portlandart.net/archives/2017/04/experiencing_ro.html)). On other occasions, the curator has used it to set the tone for the exhibition to follow – a French garden courtyard for the "Paris 1900" (<https://www.orartswatch.org/parisian-glamour-at-the-portland-art-museum/>) exhibition, or a Japanese tea house for the 2018 "Poetic Imagination" (<https://www.orartswatch.org/thrilling-the-cognoscenti-and-educating-the-rest-of-us/>) show. With the Mexican Modernism show, the atrium houses works executed by local artists that are relevant to the theme but not part of the traveling exhibition. What is notable about this auxiliary exhibit is that it solves an inherent problem with the show, demonstrates the museum's commitment to the local community, and provides a fitting commentary on how historical artists can shape contemporary collective identity.



Diego and Frida Are Here in process at the Portland Art Museum.

Let's start with how these murals address a hole in the proposed theme of the show "Mexican Modernism." I'm an art historian. I teach courses on Modernism at Portland-area universities. I teach Mexican Modernism often, so I initially approached this exhibition on the basis of what I teach my survey students: The core output of Mexican Modernism is murals, specifically the large-scale murals associated with "Los Tres Grandes": Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Jose Clemente Orozco. These expressly public projects are firmly intertwined with the creation of a uniquely Mexican identity in the years after the Mexican Revolution.

The *public* part of the murals was central – these were illustrations of a new conception of a collective history, *for* the people. Mexican muralists wrestled with the inheritance of Pre-Columbian cultures, the Spanish conquest, colonial period, and nearly a century of overthrowing Spanish colonialism –

making this history accessible and something of which to be proud. Mexican muralism captures the stories that Mexicans told about themselves to themselves, a newly instituted national identity (that then, of course, shifted and changed in tandem with political tides).

A corollary to this was that the murals were a rejection of another type of art, art for an elite social and economic class. In his 1922 manifesto “A Declaration of Social, Political, and Aesthetic Principles,” David Alfaro Siqueiros proclaimed:

“We *repudiate* so-called easel painting and every kind of art favored by ultra-intellectual circles, because it is aristocratic, and we praise monumental art in all its forms, because it is public property.

“We *proclaim* at this time of social change from a decrepit order to a new one, the creators of beauty must use their best efforts to produce ideological works of art for the people; art must no longer be the expression of individual satisfaction which it is today, but should aim to become a fighting, educative art for all.”

There is a basic incongruity with the show at the Portland Art Museum because it is primarily a collection of easel paintings – and not just easel paintings but easel paintings from a private collection amassed by European-born art collectors, Jacques and Natasha Gelman. David Alfaro Siqueiros, he of the repudiation, even painted a portrait of Natasha Gelman in a ball gown with a dramatically plunging neckline, that is part of the exhibition. She certainly doesn’t give off a “woman of the people vibe” – big gold jewelry, blond coiffure, and bright red nails.



David Alfaro Siqueiros, Portrait of Mrs. Natasha Gelman, 1950. Oil on canvas; 47.2 x 39.4 in. (120 x 100 cm). The Vergel Foundation and MondoMostre in collaboration with the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura (INBAL). © 2020 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SOMAAP, Mexico City. Photo by Gerardo Suter.

There are mentions of muralism in the show – a set of aquatints of Rivera’s murals from the Ministry of Education were part of the show from the Gelman collection. PAM added its own set of seven lithographs by Jose Clemente Orozco of images from his works at the National Preparatory School.

There are paintings in the show that hint at this purpose of collective identity – Rivera’s *Landscape with Cacti*, for example. A wall tag points out that this work emphasizes the land as a shared place. A quote from Rivera: “I know now that he who hopes to be universal in his art must plant in his own soil...the secret of my best work is that it is Mexican.” This quote is highlighted with large-scale text in the stairwell between the first and second floors of the exhibition.



Diego Rivera, Landscape with Cacti, 1931. Oil on canvas; 49.2 x 59.1 inches. The Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection of 20th-Century Mexican Art and the Vergel Foundation and MondoMostre in collaboration with the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura (INBAL). Photo by Gerardo Suter.

But because this is a private collection and, of course, because plaster murals are site-specific and permanently installed, the work *most associated* with Mexican Modernism isn't part of this exhibition.

The PAM Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, Sara Krajewski, saw this as an opportunity. Some other host institutions acknowledged the missing murals by installing copies of murals by Rivera or Orozco on museum grounds. This was an easy solution and allowed museum visitors to see some of these mural works at the scale they were intended. Krajewski, along with the Director of Learning and Community Partnerships, Stephanie Parrish; the Head of Youth and Educator Programs, Hana Layson; and Head of Public Programs and Engagement, Jaleesa Johnston, saw a better option in using the sculpture court to house *new* murals – not printed contact sheet versions, but new compositions.

The museum had worked with Hector Hernandez on other occasions; he is a well-known muralist in the Portland area and sought after for this type of project. Hernandez collaborated with Angennette Escobar, Christian J. Barrios, and Victor Hugo Garza. The collective Ideal PDX, a Latino Artists Exchange founded in Portland and currently co-helmed by Jessica Lagunas and William Hernandez, had also worked with the museum previously and were excited to accept the invitation to participate.

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The works in the Sculpture Court aren't, strictly speaking, murals, because they're not on plaster but instead on parachute material (Hernandez) or dibond aluminum (Ideal PDX). But this quibble shouldn't detract from the ongoing work. These are *large-scale* paintings – 10 x 30 feet – and their execution has been happening daily as an ongoing part of the exhibition.



Ideal PDX artist painting Diego and Friday Are Here in the Schnitzer Sculpture Court.

I've spent a fair amount of time in the Sculpture Court watching the artists from both teams painting these murals. I've watched the museum visitors, and people genuinely seem to appreciate the artists' efforts. It does seem that visitors' enthusiasm might be making the artists' jobs harder as they are often interrupted for questions or selfies. The artists don't seem to mind (or they're good at faking it) and more than once I saw what must have been a friend of one of the artists come in to see the work and the process. There were hugs and smiles and pride at making something for the community in the Portland Art Museum. In a perfect art world, this hierarchy might not exist. But there is something notable about being a working artist and working at the literal center of the town's art establishment.

The presence of the murals and the invitation from the museum is positive but even more noteworthy to me is the subjects and content of the murals. Speaking with the artists about the murals and their interpretation of this show softened my stance about the presentation of Frida Kahlo's biography in

his show and helped me to see the artist and how a historical artist can be intertwined with contemporary identity in an authentic and non-exploitative way.

I've written about my aversion to artists' biographies (<https://www.orartswatch.org/art-review-beyond-van-gogh-at-the-oregon-convention-center/>) and works being forced into supporting contemporary tastes and predilections. When I first visited "Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, Mexican Modernism," I was bothered by the attention paid to Frida's pain and suffering. I heard one visitor call another over to a photograph exclaiming: "Look, you can see her body cast in this picture." There are multiple photographs of Frida and her doctors, Frida in bed, and Frida in a wheelchair. An untitled lithograph from 1932, often displayed with the title *The Abortion or Frida and the Miscarriage*, focuses on the artist's pain at losing a much-wanted pregnancy. It seemed aimed at casting Frida as a tragic figure, the long-suffering artist.

There is no question that Frida is the star of Hector Hernandez's mural. The large-scale triptych, titled *Metamorphosis*, shows Frida three times: once in the center surrounded by butterflies, on the right in a Pop Art homage to Kahlo and Patti Smith, and on the left, Kahlo reclining and embracing a dog. The mural leans into Kahlo's mythic status, and by referencing Patti Smith, it tackles the artist's continued cultural resonance.



Hector Hernandez with Christian J. Barrios and Angenette Escobar, Metamorphosis, 2022.

Hernandez's explanation of the composition indicates this express purpose: He wanted to highlight Kahlo's gender fluidity and "unconventional life" with the notion of Smith and the American imagination. Hernandez equally wanted to implicate the viewer as Kahlo "look [s] out at the viewer... the spectator is part of a game of the observer being observed." There is a purposefulness to the exchange, a knowing about Frida – she makes it her business to be seen. She was the engineer of her own fame and it came, not from victimization, but rather from a position of strength. Hernandez's mural emphasizes this.

I had a conversation with Hernandez about the mural and Frida while he was painting, and I asked him about the way the exhibition characterized Frida, the focus on her illnesses and misfortunate, her miscarriage, on her clothing. I was curious if he also saw this as potentially exploitative. He did not.

He saw it as a purposeful strategy on Frida's behalf, engineered *by* Frida and coming, not from an embrace of the role of victim, but rather as a display of her inherent strength rooted in matriarchy.

A central goal of Mexican Muralism as part of Mexican Modernism was the creation of a national identity. Frida Kahlo may not have been painting murals, but she certainly was creating an identity that would resonate with the Mexican people. The photos in the exhibition never show Kahlo candidly; they're always staged. The outfits are meticulously constructed to engage her indigenous Mexican heritage: the Tehuana dresses, symbolic blouses, or the elaborate ribboned hairstyles. Hernandez's spectator/spectating loop is inherent in Frida's whole ethos. She's portraying herself to look and be looked at.

This self-consciousness separates Kahlo from the biographical obsession that other artists are subject to: Kahlo made it her business to make the whole story her own. The Victoria and Albert Museum in London had an exhibition in 2018 called "Frida Kahlo: Making Herself Up" (<https://www.vam.ac.uk/exhibitions/frida-kahlo-making-her-self-up>) which expressly focused on self-construction. Hernandez's mural links this self-fashioning to contemporary American culture.

Ideal PDX's mural, *Diego and Frida Are Here*, links Rivera and Kahlo expressly to the Pacific Northwest, and in so doing provides a link between the artists and our local landscape. In the mural, Diego and Frida are central as they're transported through a portal of "Ojos de Dios," or "God's eyes," and bring with them "cultural symbols from their beloved Mexico" to the Pacific Northwest. Kahlo and Rivera appear right at home with the fir trees. The Aztec-inspired disk rises above Mt. Hood, a symbiosis of cultural touchstones.

This choice of theme is especially appropriate for Ideal PDX, as its mission "is to expand and include artists from Latinoamerica around the State of Oregon to provide professional development that will strengthen the integration into our local economy." The artists have used the occasion of this mural attached to the exhibition to further this aim – to make Diego and Frida ambassadors for a larger heralding of the Latinx community. It expands the notion of identity creation to the local community, with Frida and Diego as fearless and welcome leaders.



IDEAL PDX artists Jessica Lagunas, Daniel Santollo, José Solis, William Hernandez, and Romina del Castillo with their mural Diego and Frida Are Here.

The Wild Woman fashion pop-up, which has been on view in the atrium since May 4, engages similar ideas of ownership, identity, and empowerment. The meticulously hand-stitched *Magdalena Cape* takes inspiration from Kahlo’s lithograph *Frida and Miscarriage*. Equal parts lamentation and declaration of strength, the cape – along with other garments in the pop-up – focuses on resilience and ownership. The museum explains that this collection is intended for auction, with 100% of the proceeds going to the nonprofit organization Fondo Semillas, which “works to improve women’s lives in Mexico.”



Wild Woman, Magdalena Cape, 2020. Inspired by Kahlo's 1932 lithograph Frida and the Miscarriage. Creation of the WILD WOMAN Magdalena Cape is supported by the Portland Art Museum, the Meriwether Group, Otiima and Scarlet Chamberlin Styling Co.

This triad of works shifts the exhibition from an impersonal traveling collection to something that is part of the community. An occasion not just to shuffle past some nice works amidst yelping school children but to reflect on what art can do and how even historical art actively shapes ideas of ourselves and our community. So maybe, thanks to local artists and the team at Portland Art Museum, we get to be special after all.

“Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Mexican Modernism” is on view at the Portland Art Museum through June 5th. Reserved/advanced tickets are highly recommended.

The museum is holding extended viewing hours for members on Thursday, May 26th and Thursday, June 2nd from 5:00-8:00 pm. Advanced ticket reservations are required.

Ideal PDX will have a community presentation (<https://portlandartmuseum.org/exhibitions/frida-kahlo-diego-rivera-and-mexican-modernism/>) “Frida is Here: Mural Painting Reflections by Ideal PDX” on May 29th from 2:00-3:30 pm online.

(<https://www.orartswatch.org/membership/>)

Laurel Reed Pavic

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Laurel Reed Pavic is an art historian. Her academic research dealt with painting in 15th and 16th century Dalmatia. After finishing her PhD, she quickly realized that this niche, while fascinating, was rather small and limited her interests so that she could engage with a wider audience. In addition to topics traditionally associated with art history, she enjoys considering the manipulation and presentation of cultural patrimony and how art and art history entangle with identity. She teaches a variety of courses at Pacific Northwest College of Art including courses on the topic of printmaking, the history of printed matter, modernism, and protest art.

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