

Frida and justice for all

The National Museum of Mexican Art gives Kahlo's contemporaries their due. By **Ruth Lopez**

As the subtitle of the main exhibition at the National Museum of Mexican Art suggests, Frida Kahlo casts a long, long shadow. "Women Artists of Modern Mexico: Frida's Contemporaries," up through September 2, brings together pieces by 26 women artists working in the decades following the Mexican Revolution, which lasted from 1910 to 1921. Given that Kahlo's 100th birthday on July 6 was celebrated in countless museums around the globe with special exhibits and parties, this exhibition could be viewed as sort of a protracted birthday gathering.

At the center of the party is Kahlo's *The Little Deer* (1946), a small canvas depicting Kahlo with the body of a deer pierced by nine arrows as it runs through the woods. It's a fantastic lure, but then so is the work of many of the other artists here, from Surrealists Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo to photographers Tina Modotti and Lola Álvarez Bravo. Among Bravo's images is one of Kahlo hanging out in her Coyoacán home with two of her dogs. Also in the show is work by Fanny Rabel (b. 1922), who studied under Kahlo in the 1940s and was among the small band of painting students referred to as "Los Fridos." Another one of Kahlo's friends here is Aurora Reyes (1908–85), the first female to paint a mural. *Ataque a la Maestra Rural*, painted in 1936 for the Centro Escolar Revolution in Mexico City, still stands.

With all these Kahlo associations, it may be easy to overlook the historical context. Mexico had been ruled for 30 years by dictator Porfirio Díaz, a tyrant with no particular love for the native peoples of his country. Postrevolution artists contributed to the search for a national identity by exploring indigenous culture. Artists became fascinated by the pre-Columbian past as well as Indian rituals and folklore. There was also an instinctual connection to Surrealism. These shared concerns and inspirations can be spotted throughout the exhibition.

While all of the artists in the show are considered Mexican, several were not born there. For instance, the Hungarian-born photographer Kati



Left, Maria Izquierdo, *Portrait of Belém*, 1928.

Horna (1912–2000) was associated with the Surrealists for a time. She and her husband documented the Spanish Civil War and moved to Mexico City in 1939 to escape the Nazis. Chicago native Mariana Yampolsky, a graduate of the University of Chicago, made Mexico her adopted home in 1948. Yampolsky was a graphic designer and master engraver who worked at the Taller de Gráfica Popular. She was also a photographer. When Yampolsky died in 2002, there were 60,000 negatives in her archive. Perhaps one day we'll be lucky enough to see an exhibition of her work.

Curator Dolores Mercado dedicated a patch of wall space to each artist,

accompanied by bios and photos of the women. "Everyone recognizes Frida now," Mercado says, "and I want everyone to know these artists like they do Frida."

Mercado joined forces with Mexico City curator and art historian Tomás Zurián to pull together the show. But the smaller companion exhibition, "Nahui Olin: A Woman Beyond Time," is the result of Zurián's obsession.

Olin (1893–1978) is one of those fascinating creatures whose life is easily what makes her art compelling. Born Carmen Mondragon, the daughter of a general under Díaz, she was renamed by painter Dr. Atl (the professional moniker of Gerald



Right, Edward Weston, *Nahui Olin*, 1923.

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Murillo). Zurián became smitten with Olin, of whom there was scant documentation, after coming across a photograph of her in the late 1970s, an arresting close-up taken by Edward Weston in 1924 that showed her fierce beauty. Olin "hated that image," Zurián says, and demanded that Weston give her the negative. That photo (shown above) is included here, as well as more glam shots like the ones taken at MGM when Olin briefly flirted with the idea of being a Hollywood starlet. But mostly the walls are filled with paintings, many from the 1920s and '30s, of her favorite topics: sex, herself, sex, folk customs, sex and cats. Olin's paintings, which have a Naïve flavor, feel rushed, and Zurián says there is a reason for that. "She had to invent a system that permitted her to work with great speed so she would have more time to dedicate to love," he says. He was only half joking. Olin was more comfortable and open with her sexuality than most people ever are.

With these two exhibitions, the museum extends its mission to not only promote women artists but to secure cultural patrimony status for each of them—which means their work would not be permitted to leave Mexico except for loans to exhibitions. In 1984, the Mexican government put Kahlo on that short list.

"Women Artists of Modern Mexico" and "Nahui Olin" are at the National Museum of Mexican Art through September 2.