

Magic Visions – Blood as the Ink of Existence in Frida Kahlo’s Paintings and Beyond

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Abstract: This essay explores the profound symbolism of blood in art, focusing on Frida Kahlo’s works and their influence on avant-garde artists. Blood, as a visceral and symbolic medium, serves as a powerful metaphor for pain, resilience, and existential inquiry. Kahlo’s paintings, such as *The Suicide of Dorothy Hale* (1938) and *Tree of Hope, Remain Strong* (1946), utilize blood to articulate physical suffering, emotional turmoil, and defiance against fate. In *The Suicide of Dorothy Hale*, Kahlo controversially employs the traditional Christian “ex-voto” or “retablo” form to depict a suicide, blending sacred and secular narratives, while challenging religious orthodoxy. *Tree of Hope, Remain Strong* juxtaposes her physical agony with a resolute spirit, symbolizing the duality of human vulnerability and strength. The essay further examines how blood as an artistic medium transcends Kahlo, influencing artists like Yves Klein, Michel Journiac, Gina Pane, and Vincent Castiglia. Klein’s *Le peintre de l’espace se jette dans le vide* (1960) uses bodily risk to explore immateriality, while Journiac’s *Messe pour un corps* (1969) and Pane’s *Le corps pressenti* (1975) transform blood into a ritualistic and subversive force, interrogating identity and societal norms. Castiglia’s use of his own blood as paint underscores the intimate connection between life and art. Collectively, these artists expand the symbolism of blood beyond personal suffering, exploring themes of mortality, transcendence, and the corporeal. Their works, though distinct, form a cohesive narrative that redefines blood as a medium for profound artistic and existential expression, challenging traditional boundaries and enriching the discourse on art and human experience.

Keywords: blood in art; visceral symbolism; existential suffering; artistic transcendence; corporeal rituals; metaphysical exploration

1. Preface

Blood, perhaps, is the most direct response to “the ultimate nature and true essence of all phenomena” (a Chinese Buddhist terminology, the Chinese pronunciation is: Zhū fǎ shí xiāng)—an unequivocal and incisive depiction of sensory perception. Blood is both a reality and a sharp, vivid symbol. When blood flows from the body, it becomes the most palpable, visceral sensation. After Van Gogh cut off his ear, he created several self-portraits, among which one titled *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear and Pipe* (1889) features a background split between orange-red and blood-red. In the thick, sweeping strokes of paint, one can almost feel the blood spurting from an ear as it falls to the dirt.



Image 1. *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear and Pipe* (1889), by Vincent van Gogh

Website Resource: <https://www.vincentvangogh.org/self-portrait-with-bandaged-ear-and-pipe.jsp>

In leafing through Frida Kahlo's diaries and paintings, "blood" seems to possess a supernatural, magnetic allure, like a force capable of ensnaring the soul, rendering her entranced and consumed. When she wrote of her passionate love for Diego Rivera, the imagery of "blood" flows relentlessly from her pen: "My fingertips touch your blood. All my joy comes from feeling the fountain of your blooming life surge forth, filling every one of my veins."^[1] Perhaps her fingers graze Diego's body, or perhaps nothing at all -- "touching blood" is an imaginative extension of a desire so sharp, so visceral, it is as though the eyes themselves reach deep into the very core of the flesh, igniting passion within a delirious reverie. The phrase "my fingertips touch your blood" is unfathomable, fervent, and electrifying, yet also profoundly terrifying, for blood can only be touched by slicing through the flesh, and the act of bleeding is the closest one can come to death. The love that haunts Frida's every waking thought, that holds her captive, is but a hair's breadth away from pain, sorrow, and the inexorable pull of death.

2. *The Suicide of Dorothy Hale* (1938): Blood, Sacred Abyss and Struggle for Redemption

2.1 A Chiaroscuro of Chaos and Eternity: Frida Kahlo's Blood-Stained Haunting Ode to Loss

On the fateful day of October 21, 1938, the luminous life of Dorothy Hale, a cherished confidante of Frida Kahlo, was extinguished in a harrowing plunge from a towering edifice. Clare Boothe Luce, the formidable publisher of *Vanity Fair* and a mutual acquaintance of both Frida and Dorothy, was seized by profound anguish upon receiving the grievous tidings. With an immediacy borne of heartfelt sorrow, Clare reached out to Frida, proffering a sum of \$400 to commission a commemorative portrait of the departed soul.^[2] Clare's noble aspiration was to bestow this poignant tableau upon Dorothy's bereaved mother, a matron engulfed in the desolate agony of outliving her progeny, thereby immortalizing the ethereal beauty that Dorothy had embodied in life. She imparted to Frida her vision that this evocative masterpiece would grace the space above the hearth in Dorothy's mother's parlor, a sanctum where memories would flicker like the enduring flames of remembrance.

In the sultry August of 1939, Clare Boothe Luce received the long-awaited commission from Frida Kahlo, her heart brimming with anticipatory reverence. Yet, as she unwrapped the parcel with trembling hands, her soul was assailed by a visage so macabre that it nearly rendered her insensate. Far from the conventional elegiac portrait Clare had envisioned, Frida had conjured a tableau of such visceral intensity that it laid bare the harrowing saga of Dorothy Hale's self-inflicted demise in a manner both unflinching and transcendent.



Image 2. *The Suicide of Dorothy Hale* (1938), by Frida Kahlo

Website Resource: <https://www.fridakahlo.org/the-suicide-of-dorothy-hale.jsp>

The painting, a masterwork of meticulous detail, unfolded the tragic narrative with unsparing clarity: from Dorothy's solitary figure poised on the balcony's precipice, to her precipitous descent through the void, and finally to her lifeless form, shattered and bloodied upon the unforgiving ground. Each moment was rendered with a precision that bordered on the forensic, yet imbued with an otherworldly aura.

Dorothy, as she stood upon the balcony, was depicted as a diminutive, almost spectral figure, her presence already attenuated, as though she had begun her inexorable retreat from the mortal coil. In her plunge, she was enveloped in a shroud of ethereal, lavender-hued mist, her body inverted, her eyes a vortex of disillusionment and mistrust, devoid of any vestige of earthly attachment. Her garments, their once-vibrant hues now muted and indistinct, melded seamlessly with the velvety, enigmatic fog, as though the very fabric of her being was dissolving into the ephemeral embrace of the beyond. This haunting portrayal was not merely a depiction of death, but a profound meditation on the fragility of existence and the inexorable pull of oblivion.

The act of suicide -- her descent through the air -- was rendered as a surreal, almost transcendent performance, a chiaroscuro of chaos and hazy luster, a hauntingly beautiful romantic tragedy. Yet, the depiction of its culmination -- the moment of impact -- was jarringly stark, a visceral embodiment of the

Chinese idiom “as far apart as heaven and earth” (Chinese pronunciation: tiān rǎng zhī bié). When her body collided with the ground, the brutal reality erupted in a sanguineous tableau. Blood, which she had long ceased to care for, erupted from her temples and ears, a grotesque contrast to the elegance she had once embodied.

It was only then that the viewer could discern the details of her final attire -- the black evening gown she had so adored in life, still exuding an air of grace, the yellow rose corsage still blooming with delicate vibrancy. Yet, blood seeped from beneath her still-slender waist, staining the fabric, while her delicate arms were drenched in crimson. Most chilling of all were her eyes, which remained obstinately open, brimming with a sorrowful resolve and an unyielding, almost accusatory gaze, as if refusing to grant the world the closure of her final rest.

No wonder Clare, upon her initial encounter with this harrowing masterpiece, was seized by a profound sense of dread and despair, her spirit crushed under the weight of its unrelenting truth. So overwhelming was her reaction that she briefly contemplated destroying the painting, only to be persuaded by friends to preserve it ^[3], a testament to the raw, unflinching power of Frida’s vision.

2.2 Frida Kahlo’s Blood-Soaked Retablo: Faith, Blasphemy, and An Elegy of Mourning

What renders this painting particularly contentious is its execution in the form of an “ex-voto” painting, or “retablo”, a devotional art form steeped in profound spiritual and cultural significance. Since the European colonizers implanted the seeds of Christian faith across the vast expanse of Latin America, the tradition of “ex-voto” paintings or “retablo” has flourished, becoming a poignant medium for expressing divine gratitude and human vulnerability. Whether it be recovery from a grave illness or survival amidst the cataclysmic fury of earthquakes and floods, devout Christians have fervently believed that such deliverance was wrought through prayer, a testament to God’s merciful intervention. ^[4]

On humble canvases of thin tin sheets, the local artisans of Mexico have poured forth their tribulations and their gratitude, capturing both the harrowing trials they endured and the divine grace that spared them. These works, often imbued with a raw, almost naive sincerity, serve as visual prayers, a fusion of the sacred and the personal, where the boundaries between the mortal and the divine blur in a tapestry of faith and survival. ^[5] Frida’s appropriation of this form for her depiction of Dorothy Hale’s tragic end thus becomes a provocative act, intertwining the sacred tradition of “ex-voto” painting or “retablo” with the secular, yet deeply personal, narrative of loss and remembrance.

The “ex-voto” painting or “retablo”, a devotional artifact of profound spiritual resonance, is meticulously composed of two distinct yet harmonious elements. The upper eighty to ninety percent of the canvas is devoted to a vivid tableau, a visual narrative that captures the divine intervention in human affairs. For instance, it might depict a man afflicted with crippled legs, his family kneeling in fervent supplication, while Christ or the Virgin Mary manifests in a celestial apparition amidst the clouds, bestowing a miraculous restoration of mobility upon the once-bedridden sufferer. These scenes are rendered with a poignant clarity, a testament to the power of faith and the tangible presence of the divine in the lives of the faithful. ^[6]

Separated typically by a horizontal line, the lower ten to twenty percent of the painting is reserved for the inscription, or the dedicatory text. This portion articulates the narrative’s intricate details -- the sequence of events, the *raison d’être* for the creation of the artwork, and a litany of praises extolling the boundless love and omnipotence of God. These words, often imbued with a reverential eloquence, serve as a verbal counterpart to the visual narrative, encapsulating the essence of the devotee’s gratitude and devotion. ^[7]

In essence, the “ex-voto” painting or “retablo” stands as an artistic manifestation of Christian faith, a tangible expression of the believer’s journey through tribulation to redemption, and a perpetual homage to the divine grace that permeates their existence. ^[8]

Frida Kahlo’s personal collection boasted numerous retablos, those poignant devotional paintings that encapsulate moments of divine intervention and human gratitude. ^[9] It looks like that her commemorative work for Dorothy Hale is meticulously crafted within this venerable tradition. The painting, bifurcated by a deliberate horizontal line, presents a harrowing tableau above: Dorothy’s tragic leap from the vertiginous heights of the Hampshire House, a scene imbued with both visceral immediacy and spectral

detachment. Below this evocative imagery, an inscription is elegantly rendered, its words a somber testament to the event it memorializes:

“In New York City on the 21st of October 1938, at 6:00 in the morning, Dorothy Hale committed suicide by throwing herself from a very high window in the Hampshire House. In her memory, this retablo was executed by Frida Kahlo.”

Is this, then, truly the case? To those unacquainted with the tenets of Christian faith, this painting might appear as a mere transposition of an art form -- popularized in Mexico through Spanish colonial influence -- onto a memorial portrait, rendering it uniquely unconventional and strikingly distinctive. However, to the devout Christian eye, such an act is nothing short of sacrilege. Suicide, long condemned by Christian doctrine as an affront to the sanctity of life, is viewed with profound solemnity; the souls of those who take their own lives are believed to be consigned to the abyss of hell. Consequently, the bodies of suicides have historically been denied burial in consecrated church grounds or even in proximity to sacred spaces, a practice that persists to this day.

Thus, the use of the ex-voto or retablo form -- a medium traditionally reserved for glorifying God's mercy and miraculous interventions -- to commemorate the suicide of Dorothy Hale is perceived by the faithful as a grievous desecration, an act that verges on blasphemy. To them, it is an unthinkable inversion of a sacred tradition, a profane appropriation of a devotional art form to honor a life ended in a manner deemed irreconcilable with divine will. This tension between artistic innovation and religious orthodoxy underscores the provocative nature of Frida's work, a bold and controversial gesture that challenges the boundaries of faith, art, and memory.

Frida created this painting during a period of separation from Diego, a time when she herself was ensnared in the throes of heartbreak, depression, and despair, even contemplating suicide.^[10] Perhaps this work indirectly conveys her questioning of the very existence of God, or perhaps it is a plea for divine forgiveness and understanding. Regardless, the visual impact of the painting far exceeded the emotional capacity of Dorothy's friends and family.

To begin with, the figure soaring through clouds and mist should, by all traditional conventions, be Christ, the Virgin Mary, or an angel. Yet here, it is Dorothy, mid-plunge from a towering height, a substitution that is both shocking and sacrilegious. To further evoke the illusion of a eulogy written in blood, Frida deliberately painted pools of blood in the dedicatory text section, each drop seemingly trembling and screaming in agony. The words themselves appear as though infected with a feverish crimson hue, as if stricken by a scarlet malaise. The blood even spills chaotically and messily onto the frame itself.

This confined space swells with the presence of blood, yet is simultaneously constrained by it. No matter how dreamlike and ethereal the sensation of falling through the clouds may seem, the moment of bone-shattering impact and bloodshed is the brutal return to reality. Dreams suspended in the heavens must inevitably crash to earth, and only pain can awaken the soul. In the moment of release, life itself is extinguished.

Although *The Suicide of Dorothy Hale* stands, in certain respects, as a stark deviation from Christian orthodoxy -- Frida having seemingly chosen the incongruous medium of an ex-voto or retablo to portray a visceral and sanguine tragedy -- this does not, by any measure, suggest that Frida was inherently anti-Christian. Indeed, her relationship with the Christian faith was a labyrinth of profound complexity and emotional depth. On one hand, her existence was a relentless odyssey of tribulation, a life so marred by the capricious cruelty of fate that the very notion of a benevolent God appeared not only dubious but almost mocking. On the other hand, it was precisely through this crucible of unrelenting suffering that God, for Frida, became a paradoxical beacon of solace and redemption -- a divine presence that both haunted and healed. Thus, her faith was not a mere binary of belief or rejection, but a richly textured tapestry woven with threads of doubt, anguish, and an almost desperate yearning for spiritual transcendence.

Therefore, *The Suicide of Dorothy Hale* could be regarded as a poignant homage, bridging the sacred tradition of the “retablo” with the deeply personal narrative of loss and remembrance. Through this act of artistic devotion, Frida not only honors Dorothy's memory but also intertwines her own voice with the centuries-old practice of visual storytelling, creating a work that is as much a prayer as it is a masterpiece.

3. *Tree of Hope, Remain Strong* (1946): Frida Kahlo's Blood-Stained Ode to Resilience

In 1946, Frida Kahlo underwent yet another surgical procedure in the United States. Upon her return to Mexico, she was confined to wearing a steel medical corset for eight interminable months. Despite this, her health continued its inexorable decline. The excruciating pain in her spine rendered her restless, unable to find solace whether sitting or lying down. ^[1] As the adage goes, joyful moments fleetingly vanish, while periods of suffering stretch endlessly, each second a torment. In this crucible of agony, she once again channeled her misfortune and indomitable spirit onto the canvas. That same year, she created *Tree of Hope, Remain Strong*, a painting bifurcated into two distinct realms:

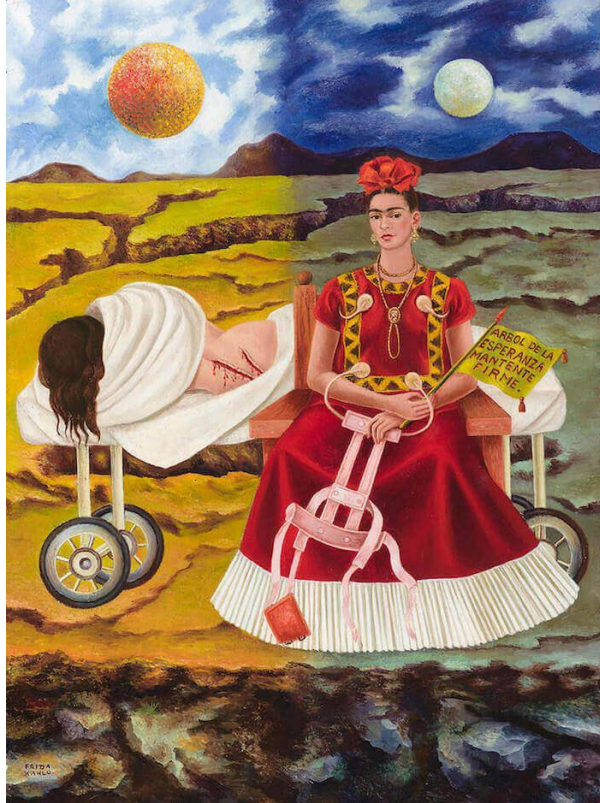


Image 3. *Tree of Hope, Remain Strong* (1946), by Frida Kahlo
Website Resource: <https://www.fridakahlo.org/tree-of-hope.jsp>

On the right side of the canvas, Frida lies on an operating table, her back turned to the viewer. The white sheet, resembling a shroud, wraps around her shoulders and hips, while her chestnut hair cascades limply downward. Two ghastly incisions mar her spine, their jagged edges oozing blood that seems to snarl and writhe. The calamities and trials she has endured, her resentment, and her vehement indictment of fate's injustice are all laid bare, each drop of blood seeping into the viewer's consciousness, a visceral testament to her suffering.

On the left side of the canvas, Frida sits regally upon a broad wooden chair, adorned in the resplendent elegance of a Tehuana dress. Her hair is meticulously coiffed, crowned with a bow-like floral ornament, while golden earrings dangle from her lobes, and an opulent necklace graces her neck. Yet, starkly incongruous with this tableau of grandeur is the cold, metallic medical corset she clutches in her left hand. Its four steel rings resemble spectral tendrils, constricting her chest, rendering the vibrant, embroidered splendor of her Tehuana dress eerily impotent. Her powdered face bears faint traces of tears, but the sorrow etched upon it is restrained, dignified—devoid of histrionics or melodrama, seeking no pity.

In her right hand, she holds a banner inscribed with the Spanish words, “Árbol de la Esperanza, Mantente Firme” (Tree of Hope, Remain Strong), a phrase drawn from the Mexican song *Cielito Lindo*. This declaration, both a plea and a defiant affirmation, serves as a beacon of resilience amidst the tempest of her suffering. The juxtaposition of her resplendent attire and the grim reality of her physical torment creates a poignant tension, a testament to her unyielding spirit in the face of relentless adversity.

Both the operating table and the wooden chair are set upon a desiccated, fissured earth, its vast, elongated, and unfathomable crevices symbolizing wounds. This landscape, reminiscent of the aftermath of an earthquake or a prolonged drought, serves as the backdrop in many of Frida Kahlo’s paintings, emblematic of a perpetually wounded self. On the right side of the canvas, the sun blazes mercilessly, while on the left, the moon bathes the scene in its serene, silvery light. This stark contrast between day and night evokes a mood deeply rooted in Mexico’s geography and ecological environment. The scorching daylight, intense enough to make the mythical subterranean lizard-people emit smoke, is juxtaposed with the gentle, healing luminescence of the moon, which soothes parched souls.

Thus, the Frida on the left side of the canvas appears to be in the process of self-healing. The tender, moonlit glow caresses her tear-streaked cheeks and her still-unhealed wounds, offering a balm to her fractured spirit. This interplay of celestial forces not only underscores the duality of her existence but also mirrors the cyclical nature of suffering and solace, a poignant reflection of her enduring resilience.

Reflecting on this painting, Frida once remarked, “There is a skeleton -- death fleeing before my will to survive.”^[12] This statement reveals a stark contrast to her earlier work, *The Two Fridas* (1939), where both figures were depicted as emotionally wounded. In this piece, however, Frida deliberately crafts a duality: one figure embodies weakness, the other strength; one is a victim, the other a survivor; one awaits rescue, the other is the valiant savior. This dichotomy serves to underscore her defiance against fate.

Yet, Frida is acutely aware that misfortune will strike again. The specter of death looms like a ceaselessly sounding alarm, its threat never fully dispelled. Thus, the precipice of an abyss lies hidden beneath the folds of her long skirt, and the word “hope” -- at times unyielding, at others fragile and elusive -- teeters on the brink of plunging into the void. This precarious balance is the painting’s most disquieting aspect, leaving viewers in a state of perpetual unease, a haunting reminder of the fragility of hope and the ever-present shadow of mortality.

Frida is a complex amalgamation of fragility and fortitude, a living paradox. Yet, who is not? Is this not the very essence of authentic humanity? Who among us has not known moments of despondency and melancholy? Who does not aspire to resilience and unyielding determination? And who would willingly succumb to the caprices of fate? A person of genuine emotion wears their joys and sorrows openly, while an artist of unbridled passion pours their heart onto the canvas. To weep is to weep unabashedly; to laugh is to laugh with unbridled joy. Both tears and laughter are interwoven into the very fabric of our blood, the life force that courses through our veins, bearing witness to the full spectrum of human experience.

Frida Kahlo’s *Tree of Hope, Remain Strong* is not merely a painting; it is a portal into the depths of human endurance, a symphony of pain and resilience that resonates with the universal struggle against fate’s cruel whims. Through her art, Frida transforms her suffering into a language that speaks to the soul, a language where blood and tears become the ink of existence, and hope flickers like a fragile flame in the face of an encroaching void. The duality she portrays -- between victim and survivor, despair and defiance, the blazing sun and the soothing moon -- mirrors the eternal dance of light and shadow within us all. Her work is a testament to the indomitable spirit that refuses to be extinguished, even as the body falters and the world crumbles.

In this masterpiece, Frida does not merely depict her own suffering; she invites us to confront our own. The fissured earth beneath her feet is not just a symbol of her wounds but a reflection of the fractures within every human heart. The banner she holds, inscribed with “Árbol de la Esperanza, Mantente Firme”, is not just a personal plea but a universal call to resilience, a reminder that hope, however fragile, is a force that can defy even the darkest abyss. Yet, Frida’s art does not offer easy solace. The precipice hidden beneath her skirt, the ever-looming specter of death, and the blood that seeps into the canvas all serve as stark reminders of life’s precariousness. Her work is a mirror held up to the human condition, reflecting both our fragility and our capacity for transcendence.

Through *Tree of Hope, Remain Strong*, Frida Kahlo becomes more than an artist; she becomes a prophet of the human spirit, a voice that speaks across time and space to remind us of our shared vulnerability and our shared strength. Her art is a bridge between the personal and the universal, the sacred and the profane, the ephemeral and the eternal. In her hands, pain, especially the image of blood and bleeding, becomes poetry, and suffering becomes a testament to the resilience of the soul. Frida's legacy is not just her art but her unyielding belief in the power of hope, a belief that continues to inspire and challenge us to remain strong, even in the face of life's most harrowing storms.

4. After Frida Kahlo: The Avant-Garde Artists' Blood Sacrifice and Transcendence

Frida Kahlo is not the sole artist to have been galvanized by suffering and bloodshed in the pursuit of artistic creation. Born in 1928, Yves Klein, the vanguard of French Nouveau Réalisme and a pioneering force in the realm of performance art, was once profoundly captivated by the concepts of void and immateriality. On a certain day in October 1960, driven by an insatiable desire to experience and convey the sensation of weightlessness and the body's plunge into the abyss, he cast aside all concern for his own mortality. Without any protective measures, he leapt from the second-floor window of a building on Rue Gentil-Bernard in the suburbs of Paris. This audacious act of aerial defiance was captured by the lens of photographer Harry Shunk, and the resulting image was later published by Klein in his self-founded newspaper, *Dimanche 27 Novembre 1960*. He christened this performance piece *Le peintre de l'espace se jette dans le vide* (The Painter of Space Leaps into the Void).^[13]



Image 4. *Le Saut dans le vide* (Leap into the Void); photomontage by Shunk-Kender (Harry Shunk and Janos Kender) of a performance by Klein at Rue Gentil-Bernard, Fontenay-aux-Roses, October 1960

Website Resource: <https://www.laboiteverte.fr/les-coulisses-du-saut-dans-le-void-dyves-klein/>

Reflecting on the experience of pain and blood, Klein mused, "Sensation is that which exists outside our own existence, yet eternally belongs to us."^[14] This ethereal and almost ineffable imagination, when fused with the raw, visceral realities of pain and blood, transforms into an enduring artwork, forever intertwined with the essence of life itself. Through this act, Klein transcended the mundane, elevating the

ephemeral and the corporeal into a sublime testament to the human spirit's unyielding quest for meaning and transcendence.

The French artist Michel Journiac (b. 1935) stands as one of the seminal figures in the invention of body art, a movement that redefined the boundaries of artistic expression. His work, both poetic and subversive, is a searing critique of societal norms, interrogating the ways in which bodies are commodified, ritualized, and controlled by the structures of power. Journiac's practice, which melds performance, photography, and visceral materiality, is a relentless exploration of identity, sacrifice, and the sacred within the profane. In 1969, Journiac erupted onto the art scene with *Messe pour un corps* (Mass for a Body), a performance that was as spectacular as it was provocative. In this radical act, he distributed fake communion hosts crafted from black pudding infused with his own blood, transforming the Eucharist -- a symbol of spiritual transcendence -- into a visceral, corporeal ritual.^[15] This act was not merely a gesture of shock but a profound reimagining of the sacred, where the body itself became both the altar and the offering. By substituting the traditional wafer with a substance imbued with his own life force, Journiac challenged the boundaries between the spiritual and the physical, the sacred and the grotesque, forcing viewers to confront the raw, unvarnished reality of existence.

Journiac's works and actions were a deliberate attempt to dismantle and reverse the rituals that reduce bodies to mere objects, malleable and disposable at the whims of society. Through his art, he sought to reclaim the body as a site of resistance, autonomy, and profound meaning. His performances were not just acts of rebellion but acts of reclamation, where the body -- often his own--became a canvas for exploring the intersections of identity, power, and mortality. In doing so, Journiac not only pushed the limits of what art could be but also redefined the role of the artist as both creator and provocateur, challenging audiences to see the world -- and themselves -- in radically new ways. His legacy is one of fearless innovation, a testament to the transformative power of art to disrupt, provoke, and ultimately liberate.

In 1975, in a performance piece titled *Le corps pressenti* ("The Foreseen Body"), the French-Italian artist Gina Pane (b. 1939) embarked on a visceral and audacious exploration of the body as both medium and message. With a razor blade, she meticulously incised the delicate flesh between her toes, allowing her blood to flow freely and irrevocably onto a plaster cast beneath her feet.^[16] This act was not merely a physical intervention but a profound, almost sacramental gesture, where pain and vulnerability became the raw materials of her art. The blood, pooling and drying on the white plaster, left behind permanent stains -- a haunting testament to the fragility of the human form and the indelible marks of existence.

Gina Pane's work, rooted in the radical ethos of body art, transcended traditional boundaries, challenging the viewer to confront the corporeal reality of suffering and endurance. Her performance was a bold declaration of the body's capacity to bear witness, to transform agony into a language of resistance and beauty. In this act, she not only pushed the limits of artistic expression but also redefined the relationship between artist, audience, and the ephemeral nature of creation. The blood-stained plaster became a relic, a tangible echo of a moment where art and life bled into one another, leaving an indelible imprint on the collective consciousness of those who bore witness. Through this unflinching act, Gina Pane affirmed the body as a site of both destruction and renewal, a canvas where the most primal and profound truths of human experience are laid bare.

In 1974, Petr Štembera (b. 1945), a trailblazer of Czech body art and action art, executed a profoundly provocative and ritualistic performance titled *Narcissus #1*. This work was a raw, unflinching exploration of self-identity, transformation, and the boundaries of the human body as both subject and medium. Štembera stood before an altar, its solemnity heightened by the flickering glow of lit candles, and fixed his gaze upon a self-portrait—a mirror of his own existence. The atmosphere was charged with an almost sacred intensity, as if the act itself were a sacrament of self-confrontation.

In a gesture that blurred the lines between creation and destruction, Štembera drew blood from his own body using a hypodermic needle, a stark symbol of both medical precision and self-inflicted vulnerability. He then combined this blood with his urine, hair, and nail clippings, crafting a visceral concoction that embodied the very essence of his physical being. In a climactic act of transgression and transcendence, he consumed this mixture before the altar, a ritualistic ingestion that transformed the act of self-reflection into one of self-annihilation and rebirth.^[17]

This performance was not merely an artistic statement but a radical reimagining of the myth of Narcissus, where self-obsession is not a passive gaze but an active, almost violent engagement with one's own corporeality. Štembera's work challenged the boundaries of art, pushing the limits of what could be considered both material and meaning. By incorporating elements of his own body—fluids, fragments, and flesh—he turned the act of creation into a deeply personal and universal meditation on existence, mortality, and the fragile beauty of the human condition. *Narcissus #1* stands as a testament to the power of art to confront, disturb, and ultimately transform, leaving an indelible mark on the history of avant-garde performance.

Born in 1970, the Filipino artist Elito Villaflor Circa who has embraced blood as his artistic medium, crafting surreal masterpieces that pulsate with imagination and tension. He once said: "My artwork is very important to me because they come from me, it is from my own blood, my DNA is part of it... My philosophy is that life is circular and everything is a cycle, so (my blood) is a tool that serves as a reminder of where I came from." ^[18] His works, steeped in the visceral and the otherworldly, transcend conventional boundaries, offering a glimpse into a realm where the corporeal and the ethereal intertwine. Through his use of blood, Elito Villaflor Circa has transformed the very essence of life into a conduit for art, creating pieces that are as deeply personal as they are universally resonant.

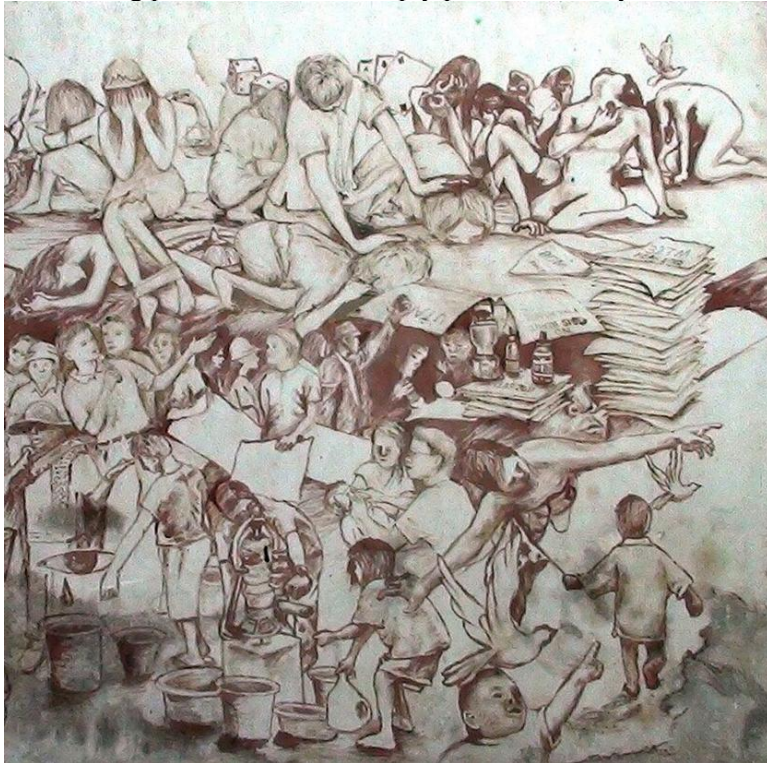


Image 5. Panta Phase III (2013), by Elito Villaflor Circa
Website Resource: https://tl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elito_Circa

Born in 1982, the American painter and tattoo artist Vincent Castiglia, in a quest to forge the most intimate connection between his own being and his art, conceived the audacious idea of painting with his own blood. For over a decade, he has drawn 450 milliliters of blood from his body each month, using it to concoct a macabre palette for his creations. This sanguine medium, imbued with the essence of his life force, perfectly complements his Gothic, darkly evocative style, rendering his works as haunting as they are profound. Vincent Castiglia's works have not only shocked the New York art scene but have also gained widespread acclaim across North America. According to his own recollections and narratives, his childhood was shrouded in shadows and scars. His mother, having endured severe abuse, developed profound psychiatric disorders, transforming from a victim into an abuser. Growing up in an extremely

distorted environment, his mother once cursed him with a chilling tone: “I should’ve ripped you out of me while I had the chance, with a hanger!” The old house he lived in during his childhood was damp and cold, with mold spreading across the ceilings and walls. In the corners of the house, layers of dead mice piled up, rotting and emitting a foul stench, yet he was forbidden from disposing of them. The intense pain carved a deep, bloody scar in his soul. He once remarked, “There was a point at which I actually started to believe I was on earth just to suffer. As if I had come into this world with bad karma, and this was reality’s way of burning it out of me. Whatever past life atrocities I had committed apparently warranted brutality in my current life.” [19] Art became his means of confronting and exorcising his nightmares. He utilized every medium he could find to create, including blood. In a sense, he shares a similarity with Frida Kahlo, as both sought to overcome their suffering by re-experiencing it through their art. If Frida Kahlo’s paintings exude blood in the realm of visual imagery and aesthetics, then Vincent Castiglia’s works are akin to eerie ballads sung in blood.



Image 6. *Parable of The Mole* (2008), by Vincent Castiglia

Website Resource: <https://crypticrock.com/interview-vincent-castiglia/>

5. Conclusions: The Transformative Power of Blood in the Artistic Explorations

It is difficult to assert with certainty whether the artists who incorporated the element of blood into their art, or even used it directly as a medium -- were directly influenced by Frida. Yet, it is undeniable that they, alongside her, have collectively forged a singular and striking tableau within the annals of art history.

Frida Kahlo, Yves Klein, Michel Journiac, Gina Pane, Petr Štembera, Elito Villaflor Circa, and Vincent Castiglia -- each of these artists, in their own distinct yet interconnected ways, has harnessed the potent symbolism of blood to explore the depths of human existence. For Frida, blood was a visceral language of pain and resilience, a medium through which she articulated her physical suffering and emotional turmoil. Her works, steeped in personal anguish, transform blood into a metaphor for both vulnerability and defiance, a testament to the enduring spirit in the face of life’s relentless trials. In contrast, Yves Klein’s *Le peintre de l’espace se jette dans le vide* (The Painter of Space Leaps into the Void) uses the concept of

blood and bodily risk to transcend the physical, seeking weightlessness and immateriality. His leap into the void is a metaphysical gesture, where blood becomes a symbol of liberation from earthly constraints. Michel Journiac and Gina Pane, on the other hand, employ blood as a tool of subversion and ritual. Journiac's *Messe pour un corps* (Mass for a Body) transforms blood into a sacred offering, challenging the boundaries between the spiritual and the grotesque, while Pane's *Le corps pressenti* (The Foreseen Body) uses blood to confront the fragility of the human form, turning pain into a language of resistance. Similarly, Petr Štembera's *Narcissus #1* and Vincent Castiglia's blood paintings delve into the corporeal, using blood as a medium to explore identity, mortality, and the raw essence of life. Elito Villaflor Circa's surreal works, meanwhile, infuse blood with a dreamlike quality, blending the visceral with the ethereal. While Frida's use of blood is deeply personal and rooted in her physical and emotional suffering, the other artists expand its symbolism into broader existential and metaphysical realms. Evidently, under the influence of the body art and performance art movements of the 1970s, artists' creative methods and processes became increasingly radical, with blood almost serving as a pivotal element in defining the artistic style and stance of certain creators. In contrast, Frida Kahlo's work appears somewhat more conventional, as it did not achieve a breakthrough in terms of artistic medium. Yet, all share a common thread: the transformation of blood from a mere biological substance into a profound artistic medium, a conduit for exploring the intersections of pain, identity, and transcendence. Together, they form a constellation of creators whose works pulsate with the raw, visceral energy of human experience, transforming pain and vitality into a profound and enduring aesthetic legacy, broadening the boundaries of art.

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