

# Growing through Self-Portraits

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## BACHELOR'S THESIS

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### Abstract

Self-portraits have long been a profound means for artists to explore and express their identities, emotions, and personal narratives. The following artists I am going to write about in this thesis will be Frida Kahlo, Kerry James Marshall and Sofonisba Anguissola. These three artists have approached self portraits differently and my aim is to examine how Kahlo, Marshall and Anguissola have respectively utilized self-portraiture to convey their personal experiences and evolving identities, serving as an inspiration to me. Frida Kahlo is one that stands out because of her distinct approach and the depth of her self-exploration in her works throughout her life. I will also present my own work, a series of self-portraits, and get into what led to the forming of those works. In the following chapters I will introduce each artist and write a brief summary of their life. I have chosen four self-portraits, two by Kahlo and one by Marshall and Anguissola which I will be examining, not so much comparing but analyzing how one can portray the self in different ways. Focusing on symbolism, change and evolution, I hope to bring to light how the self is an ever changing concept.

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## 1. FRIDA KAHLO'S LIFE AND HER FIRST KNOWN PAINTING

Frida Kahlo, born on the 7th of July in 1907, was a Mexican painter known for her deeply personal and surreal self-portraits. From Coyoacán, Mexico, she endured a difficult childhood, suffering from polio at age six, which left her with a lifelong limp. In 1925 she was in a serious bus accident that broke her spine, pelvis, and legs, leading to numerous surgeries and chronic pain. The 2002 film titled "Frida", directed by Julie Taymor, depicts this bus accident in which after the crash it is revealed a part of the handrailing from inside the bus has pierced her through the lower abdomen. This is according to Kahlo's own writing in her diary which was later posthumously published in 1995. In her diary she describes the event in painful detail. This accident impacted the rest of her life and largely influenced her art.

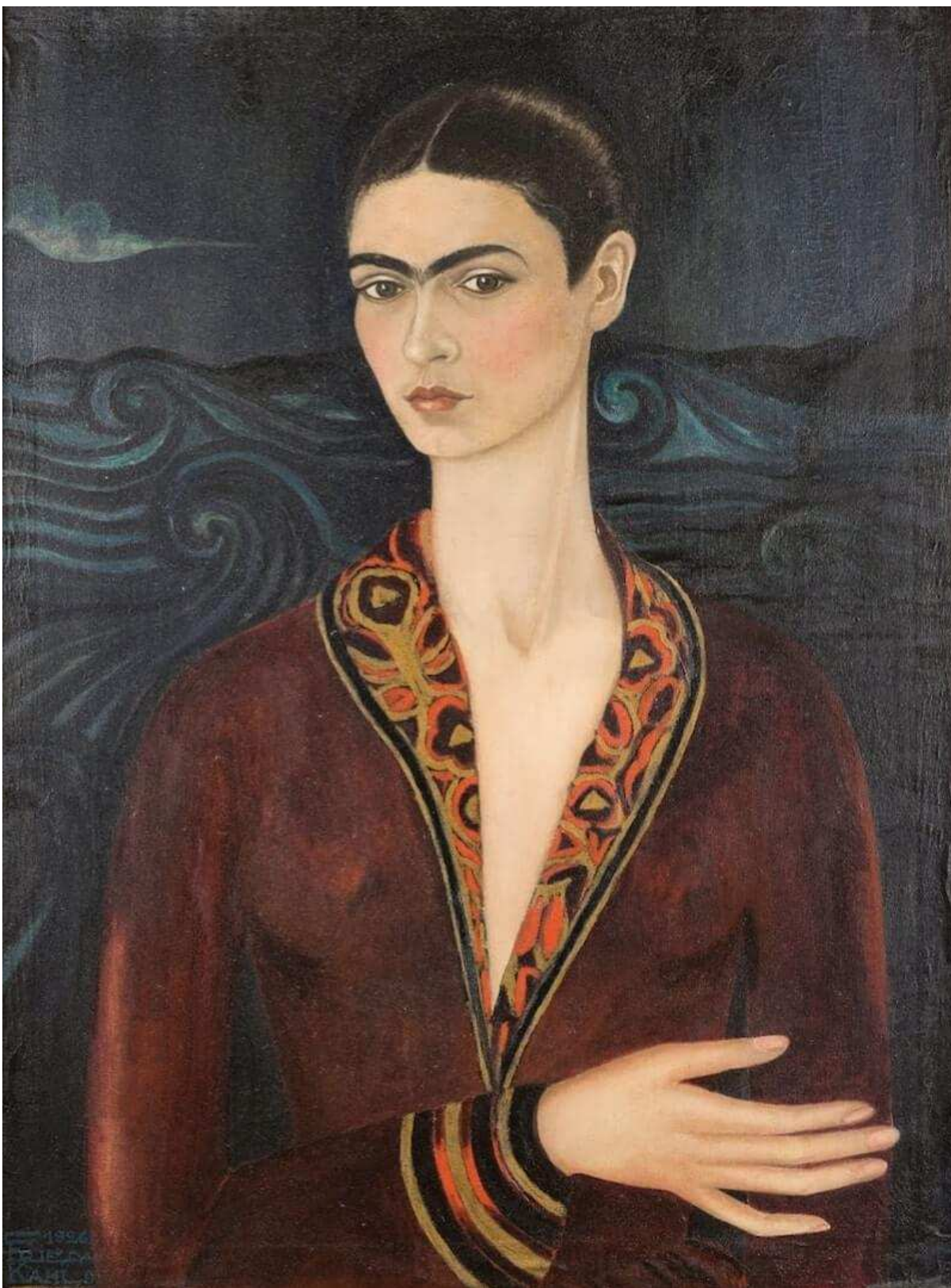
Kahlo initially planned to study medicine but turned to painting during her recovery. Her works often had themes of pain, identity and her Mexican heritage. Also her difficult marriage to Mexican muralist Diego Rivera greatly influenced her later work.

Her works gained international recognition and they were exhibited in Mexico, the U.S., and France. In 1953, she had her first solo exhibition in Mexico but was so ill that she attended in a hospital bed. She died on July 13, 1954, a week after her 47th birthday from a suspected suicide.

Frida Kahlo's art is like a visual diary of her life. Often focusing on pain; emotional and physical suffering, her personal history growing up in Mexico and her complex relationships with men and women. Kahlo's first known painting is "Self-Portrait in a Velvet Dress" (1926). She created it at age 19 while recovering from the bus accident. This painting depicts Kahlo in a red velvet dress with gold and orange detailing on the hems. Her hair is slicked back and she has pale skin, rosy cheeks, an elongated neck and her signature unibrow. Her right arm is posed over her stomach, not exactly in a rested

position. The background is gloomy, with dark blue waves and a dark blue sky with only one singular cloud behind her.

This portrait was perhaps the beginning of her exploration of herself through the visual medium of painting. It is said that she painted this as a gift to her on-off again boyfriend at the time Alejandro Arias to get him back. It worked momentarily but they ended up splitting once again. This to me shows how sometimes pictures can be used in place of words when things become too difficult to communicate. Kahlo's life was full of health challenges, lifelong physical pain and medical complications. Naturally this physical suffering, and later emotional, became a central theme in her works and was the frame that within she painted.



Autorretrato con vestido de terciopelo ( eng. Self Portrait in a Velvet Dress), 1926

## 1. 1. THE WOUNDED DEER AND GROWING PAINS

Twenty years later after Kahlo's first known painting came "The Wounded Deer" in 1946. In this painting, Frida has painted herself as a deer hybrid. A deer in motion, with all of its legs in the air and in the place of the deer's head there's Frida's own. The deer is surrounded by trees and has eight arrows sticking out of bleeding stabwounds. The landscape looks dry and in the background, between the trees, lightning strikes from a lone cloud in a blue sky onto the body of water. Frida's face doesn't seem to be in pain, she looks unphased somehow and not surprised by these arrows. Not surprised by the pain she has once again had to suffer.

Kahlo painted this portrait in 1946, 20 years after her first known self-portrait. After a failed spinal surgery in the U.S. her pain only became worse. Doctors attempted to fuse her spine back together, to stabilize it and reduce pain, but this did not work. She ended up having to wear a steel corset for support, which was incredibly uncomfortable. With increasing use of painkillers and a feeling of hopelessness Frida created the Wounded Deer.

As a self-portrait the Wounded Deer is quite surreal. Although Frida never described herself as a Surrealist the painting is very much that. She is quoted as saying "They thought I was a Surrealist but I wasn't, I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality". This style of blending different elements like animals, humans, nature and symbolism is a style of portraiture that Frida became most known for.



El Venado Herido ( eng. The Wounded Deer), 1946

## 2. INTELLECT AND AUTONOMY

Sofonisba Anguissola was an Italian Renaissance painter born in the 1530's . She is known for her portraits and self-portraits and also known for being one of the few women painters in the Renaissance era who became famous and was recognized by another big artist of that time, Michelangelo. Not only were her works successful she had also received formal artistic training, again another rarity for women at that time to be considered and even accepted into art training. Born to a noble family, Anguissola was one of six girls, most of whom also became painters. Around the 1550's, in her late 20's, she was invited over to Philip II of Spain's living court as a painter and as a companion/assistant for Queen Elisabeth of Valois.

During this time spent with the Spanish royal family, she painted many portraits for the family and used her position and privilege to further her art career. Her style has naturalism and realism with warmth and a level of intimacy. In her self portraits and portraits of others she painted, the subject maintains eye contact and sometimes appears to be smiling a little. There are also little details hidden in her paintings that bring you closer to the work, both physically to be able to see these details but also emotionally. Little details that tell you about the subject which creates a sense of becoming closer to this person in the painting after seeing it. It's not just a portrait, it's a window into a moment of their life.

From the many self-portraits Sofonisba painted during her life and career, the one I will focus on in this text was painted in 1554. This one is sometimes referred to as "The virgin Sofonisba Anguissola made this herself in 1554" but also simply as "self-portrait 1554". The portrait is small in size and painted on a wood panel. The background is a muted swamp green colour and Sofonisba is the sole focus of the painting. Right in the center she is staring directly at the viewer. Her gaze is calm, soft and stern and she's not smiling or frowning, she is just there. Dressed in a modest black dress with long brown sleeves. The dress is buttoned high up to the neckline and there is a white ruffled collar poking out, the same white ruffles are also on the hem of the sleeves. Her hair is parted through the middle and swept back in a bun with a braid around it. Noticeably, she's not wearing any jewelry.



Sophonisba Anguissola virgo seipsam fecit 1554 ( eng. The virgin Sofonisba Anguissola made this herself in 1554)

The striking thing about this portrait to me is how efficient it is. How efficient the communication between subject and viewer is, from her gaze to the little booklet she is holding. The booklet is open and on the page is written the title and year of the painting. Her gaze and dress show a woman who is certain of themselves. A woman who is autonomous and intellectual. In many of her self-portraits Sofonisba is holding or doing something. Always in motion, always active and communicating. This is a method in self-portraiture to not only show what the artist looks like but also what's important to them. This deepens a self-portrait.

### 3. A HAUNTING SHADOW

Kerry James Marshall was born in the 1950's in Alabama and raised in Los Angeles. His teen years were during the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. which deeply shaped and impacted his worldview and future art. What particularly makes Marshall's work stand out is his consistent use of the colour black in his paintings to depict Black people. In his works, Black people are quite literally black, and this is a political choice by Marshall. In European art whiteness and the colour white are seen as symbols of purity, beauty and virtue, to challenge this idea, Marshall chooses to center not only Black people in his art but the colour black itself. Commonly thought of as a symbol of darkness or negativity, Kerry James Marshall flips this and uses black as a force of beauty, grace and depth.

Marshall's early self-portrait titled "A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self" from 1980 is one of his most known works. It's a small painting and dark in tone. In the center is a black figure with a cartoonish grin, missing one tooth and wide eyes. The figure is wearing a black coat with a white shirt underneath and a brimmed hat. The background is a solid gray colour. The work is simple yet quite haunting. It feels chaotic and playful but also there is some tension there. The figure is so black it's almost as if he is hollowed out- a shadow of the artist.



A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self, 1980

#### 4. MY SELF-PORTRAIT

In this chapter, I will present my own self-portrait titled “The Self in Parts” and the process behind it. The background is bright red and in the center is me. My face has been horizontally sliced into 5 parts and my hair is parted to the side, slicked into a bun. My eyebrows are slightly raised and there is no smile. I am simply looking back at the viewer. This is one of the self-portraits in my 4 part series. The central theme is me fragmented into different parts, slices, ribbons and cubes. I depict myself with a mixture of surrealism and realism. Symbolically this piece refers to the many parts of oneself, how we are all made up of parts. These parts consist of memories, traumas, experiences, culture and time.

I like to work with bright colours as my backdrop. I used a mixture of Vermillion and Scarlet Red for the background and added some Crimson Red around the edges of my face to create depth. With the hair I added thin white highlights as a nod to Kerry James Marshall’s work. He tends to use shades of lighter grays and white to highlight the features of his characters in his paintings and often will add streaks of white into their hair. With my face being divided into slices I thought of M.C. Escher’s work, titled “Bond of Union”. In the center of that piece, there are two faces that are made of a single ribbon. As the spiraling ribbon flows toward the bottom of the piece, there it shows that the ribbon connects the two faces.

I blend realism and surrealism to create a captivating visual story. I believe less is more, therefore I don't really focus much on the backgrounds of my paintings, simply one solid colour will do for me. No need for anything else. I want the focus to truly be on the face and how that face is constructed or in my case deconstructed. The surreal is the irrational, a distortion of reality. I distort my face in many ways in these portraits, perhaps to show that I am not “whole”. But with connecting parts, like the nose connecting the two slices of my face as shown below, I am saying that I may not be whole but I am getting there. There is a chaotic optimism in my work and a certain playfulness.



The Self in Parts, 2025

## 5. CONNECTING THE SLICES

The 5 slices are connected by the nose and hair/scalp. This was not intentional at first but as I kept painting, it felt right. I am continuing this theme of dividing and connecting my face in the 3 other portraits in my series of self-portraits. Playing with various shapes, the idea is that the self is fragmented but still connected. This is a thought that has followed me for many years throughout my life as an artist. The poet and feminist Audre Lorde said “Art is not living, it is the use of living”. With this quote she is making a point to differentiate life itself from the act of making life into art. My interpretation of this is that art should be rooted in experience, art should have a purpose or a story. Creating art is not separate from life but it is the very act of living. Using art as a tool to further life, or in other words, to keep growing.

Like a puzzle, with these works I am putting myself back together again. After years of not feeling ‘whole’ and somewhat lost, I am able to find my way back home to me. There is a messiness that comes with returning to yourself. Resolutions aren't always simple, easy or neat. There was a shift in my approach to painting within the last 2 years, where I discovered my visual voice. I learned to trust the process and not to be so rigid in my work. How I want a painting to look isn't how it will ultimately end up looking. That is a part of the messiness that comes with making personal art. I mentioned earlier that the nose wasn't supposed to connect the two slices of the face, but I accidentally painted the nose like that. I could have gone back and fixed it by painting over it in red or could have started all over, but as I kept looking at this “mistake” I saw how it actually strengthens the point I am making. Connecting parts that I feel were disconnected.

In my work, I am dealing with real things in a surreal manner. Finding pathways back to myself that I hadn't traveled before. Sometimes contradicting myself without falling apart. I often find myself torn between a more literal and a dream-like approach when visualizing this chapter of difficult growth in my life. In between is where I choose to stay for now, as that is where I have found my creative process to be the most fruitful. The spaces between the slices in my self-portrait can be interpreted as distance or how I see it, as space to grow. In my paintings I make sure to have the subject looking back at the viewer, like a gentle confrontation. Embracing challenging feelings and staring right ahead, down the barrel. I believe one can be fractured and whole at the same time. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wrote about how contradiction is essential to the human experience. There is tension between who we are, who we want to be and how we are perceived by others. This tension is out of our control and in trying to control it, we lose our grip on the very thing we are trying to hold on to, ourselves.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Self-portraiture is like a record of internal growth and external circumstances (i.e. culture, heritage, political climate, relationships). Through the works of Kahlo, Anguissola and Marshall, I have explored how the self can be observed, studied and represented. By examining these three artists, I have discovered different ways to look at myself: Kahlo has taught me to acknowledge the body and recognize the value of one's physical health. How I feel in my physical body can be a tool that furthers my artistic growth. Anguissola taught me the value of consistent practice and honing one's technical skills. Through subtle assertion there is power in knowing yourself and being able to represent yourself in your work. With Marshall, I learned the importance of reclamation and resistance. I found inspiration and influence from these three artists and their distinct styles, and most importantly, gave myself permission to explore myself.

Self-portraiture is deeply personal. Creating my own series of self-portraits has allowed me to analyze what happens in the spaces between. The spaces that offer momentum to grow into who I am becoming. Slicing, breaking, separating and reconnecting parts of my face (and body), I mirror the internal work that is self development. I use the canvas as therapy and paint as my language. Whatever comes through is a way to understand myself. The canvas is a place where the self can be deconstructed, examined and put back together in a new way.

We are never static. We are fluid and constantly evolving. Growth occurs in the negative space, in the spaces between the slices. This is the beauty of life and a necessity. In twenty years, like Kahlo, I am eager to see how much deeper I can get into representing myself and my thoughts on canvas. This thesis is not a final statement but a continuation. Stepping forward into a journey of a lifetime. A journey of learning and re-learning myself- through art.

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