Analysing Frida Kahlo's Self-portraits As A Representation Of Her Identity

Introduction

This essay will examine Frida’s work named self-portrait with cropped hair from the viewpoint of identity. Identity is the way that individuals perceive and express themselves (Swann, Polzer & Seyle, 2004). In other words, it is about answering the question: “Who am I?”. Different factors that people are born with like sexes, bodies, as well as races, different environments like countries, and different experiences that people will go through often influence an individual in defining his or her own identity. People’s identities are not always constant and may change at different life stages. Experiences will help to change people’s identities. In return, individuals’ identities will also affect their choices made during their life, such as marriage, divorce, choosing friends, adopting certain lifestyles, or align with certain political beliefs based on their identities (Erikson, 1994). This essay will try to explore how famous Mexican artist Frida Kahlo used her defiant self-portrait with cropped hair to express her own identity and how Frida’s identity changed.

Analysis

Firstly, a careful and comprehensive look at the painting is necessary. In this self-portrait above painted by Frida, there is a short-hair woman, who is Frida sitting on a yellow chair. She wore an oversized black suit. Her face is cold and unmoved. And the floor is littered with writhing cut black hair, which obviously belongs to Frida Kahlo. She holds a pair of scissors in one hand and a few strands of hair in the other. The words and musical notes on the top of the painting are both from a famous Mexican folk song. It sings of a story about a man’s love to a woman because of her hair. The woman in the picture also has the features of a man that she is tall and straight, with formal black suit even though it is oversized.

Secondly, just as what Frida herself said, “I paint my own reality.” This self-portrait conveys the current reality that Frida was going through and her thoughts about her own identity. In order to have a deep understanding of the self-portrait, Frida’s marriage and divorce affairs also need to be considered. In 1929, Frida Kahlo married Diego Rivera and since that, they were Mexico's most famous couple. But Diego was more famous than Frida for his large murals. Frida was mostly famous for being Diego’s wife instead of as an independent painter. Maybe this had caused some complaints in Frida’s mind and the bad seed developed into their future relationship. But at this time, Frida loved her dear Diego and painted this to convey her love.

Frida’s identity at this time can be figured out to some extent from this painting: a tall and strong husband is hand in hand with his beloved beautiful wife, who is smaller and submissive. Frida was also smaller and less famous than Diego and was considered only a beautiful wife of a famous artist. Their marriage was not always very happy. Diego was not a faithful man and he even had a relationship with Frida’s younger sister Cristina. This was found in early 1935 and deeply hurt Kahlo's feelings. In 1938, she painted the picture below to convey her painful and complicated feelings with her sister, with whom she had blood to blood relationship. Frida’s

identity was not just an older sister of another Frida, they were also rivals in love.

Despite of these marriage affairs, Frida also had very serious health problems: two abortions, an appendectomy, and gangrenous toes (Collins, Amy Fine, 2013). She was suffering a lot. However, what was delightful to Frida was that, from 1938, Frida's paintings started to get attention from the public. She opened her first two solo shows in the two art cities: Paris and London. Her style is unique and it is considered as surrealism. Picasso gave earrings to her, the Louvre bought the painting named Frame from her, and both shows were a success. Meanwhile, she returned home and divorced with her husband Diego Rivera in November of 1939, and after a few months, she painted the famous self-portrait with cropped hair to show her mind and new identity.

In this part, a detailed analysis of the identity that Frida want to convey through the self-portrait with cropped hair will be conducted. Through these experiences and self-portraits, it can be seen that Frida’s art had always been in response to her life and self-identity. The divorce had been a hard process for her and it was also an important event that triggered Frida’s identity development. After this miserable divorce, she tried to use her artistic talent as an outlet to express her feelings for the past love and her expectations of herself. She was determined not to merely be the ex-Mrs. Rivera but a new independent woman and artist. Implicated by the musical notes, Diego loved Frida’s long hair and beautiful dresses, but Frida painted herself without both of them. This can be seen as a signal of amputation of love, not to pleasing her former husband anymore but to be herself. According to other images and photographs depicting Kahlo and Diego during their marriage time, the suit that Frida wore in the painting was recognized Rivera's (Herrera & Hayden, 2002). Frida wore it and this could be recognized as an aggressive act, implying that she was not just a wife but also a formal artist just like what a man could be. What’s more, the words and musical notes on the painting also imply that Diego loved her hair before but not anymore. As a result, she cut it off and this can be explained as an act of mourning. However, through her cold and hard facial expression, hair-cutting can also be explained as Frida’s self-assertion and determination to cut off her love to Diego. Based on the background that she was always considered as famous mural artist Diego’s wife instead of an independent female artist and along with the increasing popularity of her own art reputation, the painting was also painted as an evidence that Kahlo was determined to establish herself as an independent individual and artist. As have been mentioned in the introduction that identities will also influence people’s decisions in their lives. This new identity Frida created for herself also influenced how Frida acted in the future as a feminist.

Conclusion

In conclusion, through the series of self-portraits painted by Frida, the famous female artist’s identity and its changes are presented and analyzed. The viewers can see her identity change from a beloved and submissive wife to a miserable discarded woman and then an independent female artist that was determined to separate with her husband in the self-portrait with cropped hair. She also acknowledged that she was a feminist and asked for more attention to women’s equal rights and treatment. She is praised by feminists for her unique depiction of women’s life and identities (Broude, Norma, Garrard & Mary, 1992). Through the identity realization of Frida, many women also start to discover their own true identities. It can be concluded that Frida’s identity had been influenced by her nationality, experiences, sex, health problems and art talents, but also her identity conversely had influenced her own life choices and tracks. This is

what that has been explored from Frida’s self-portrait with cropped hair.