

You First Episode 48: Frida: Disability, Sexuality, and Art

Keith Casebonne: You're listening to "You First -- The Disability Rights Florida Podcast." In this episode, we're talking about Frida Kahlo, her art identities, and her impact on the disability community.

[background music]

Maddie Crowley: Hey, everyone. I'm Maddie.

Keith: I'm Keith, and we're the hosts of You First.

Maddie: In honor of Pride Month, upcoming Disability Pride Month in July, and always the opportunity to talk about cool disabled people, we're going to talk about Frida Kahlo.

Many are aware of the legendary artist Frida Kahlo, her famous artwork, her impact on culture, and her iconic appearance that's been recreated in shows, in art, in...

Keith: Movies. [laughs]

Maddie: ...tons and tons...Yeah, movies. It's been so well-known across media. Many people do not know that she was a bisexual, disabled woman, and with her physical disabilities due to having polio as a child and getting into a car accident later on in life.

Her disabilities made a lasting impact on her art, really heavily influencing what she painted, who she painted, and how she painted. This is really exciting. I don't think there's a huge amount of coverage about her disability in the media and online.

Excited to tell this part of her story and showcase how disability has a huge impact on someone's life, and the work that they do, and how they're remembered and honored throughout history.

Keith: Indeed. Let's kick in with a little background about, just in case you don't know who Frida Kahlo is, let's do a little background on her life. She was born in 1907 in Mexico.

In 1913, as Maddie mentioned, she was around six years old, she contracted polio. This is long before there were treatments. It left her with physical disabilities. It did damage to her right leg and foot. In fact, her right leg was a lot smaller than her left leg.

Even from a young age, it was challenging for her to sometimes even walk. She went to a preparatory school in the 1920s, outspoken, strong student, and by 15, she could even read and speak three different languages.

Maddie: What's cool about that is even in a young age, later on in her life, which we'll talk about, she becomes more outspoken and more involved in social justice work and activism. That's sometimes also a little lesser-known part of her life.

I love, from the beginning, she's such a strong advocate and committed to what she believes in in her work. I feel like that shows through when we talk about how she painted and what she painted, even with all of her disabilities. It's that theme of strength plays throughout her whole life.

Keith: She was 18. She was involved in a gruesome traffic accident. She was on a bus with her friend coming home from school. The accident was awful. She broke her spine, ribs, shoulder, her pelvis. She was wounded horribly. Even a post entered through her back and came out through her stomach.

Maddie: It was quite gruesome.

Keith: It was awful.

[crosstalk]

Maddie: ...lucky to have survived.

Keith: Absolutely. Between the polio and multiple injuries, she had a lot of mobility difficulties, severe chronic pain throughout the rest of her life. While she was recovering, that's when she got into painting a little bit.

Maddie: A few years later, about four years later, that's when she met who would become her then husband later on, Diego Rivera. They're both incredibly famous painters with huge reputations. Although they were married, each of them had lovers as well.

Annie Elaine, who's a disability advocate, does a great YouTube video talking about Frida Kahlo and her identities with disability, but also her identities with bisexuality and potentially non-monogamy and polyamory, which, for folks who may not know, that means you may have multiple partners or have interest in not having a closed typical "relationship."

She had affairs or relationships with men and women, including movie stars and other artists. This is sometimes how her story and her bisexual identity gets hidden in history because of her marriage to Diego Rivera. Her artwork shines through.

She has a painting called Two Nudes in a Forest, which clearly showcases her love, and attraction, and admiration for women. Allegedly, one of her affairs is with American painter Georgia O'Keeffe. I think it's a huge part of her story but may or may not be well known, but sometimes get shadowed by her marriage to Diego Rivera.

Thus, we'll talk about divorce from him. Just honoring that, especially during pride month and calling attention to that, is really important as a huge part of her story.

For the next few years after they got married, the couple lived in the United States before moving back to Mexico in 1933. Although they were married and they wanted to have children, we mentioned before the really horrific automobile accident where a pole went through her body. It actually went through parts of her reproductive system.

Due to her injury, she was unable and therefore the couple was unable to have children. She continued to experience pain as she navigated her life dealing with chronic pain in her right leg and foot and, ultimately, she had to get parts of her foot amputated.

Keith: I believe she had multiple miscarriages. That plus so many other aspects, put a lot of stress on their relationship, and in 1935, Kahlo and Rivera separated. Frida Kahlo moved to New York, began working on art there, and exhibiting a lot of her work. Over the course of the next decade, she started to gain a little popularity.

Before that, she really wasn't known very well, but that started to change. Unfortunately, this also started happening later in her life, where her health was declining more and more. She had multiple surgeries. I believe, in one year, she had seven back surgeries through a surgeon in Mexico City she credited for really keeping her alive, but regardless, that was...

Maddie: She painted him after she was recovered. For the nine months she was in the hospital, the first painting she did was of him and her position next to him...

[crosstalk]

Keith: Right, like a self-portrait of her doing a self-portrait of him.

Maddie: Yeah, exactly.

Keith: She ended up having her right leg amputated, and she got a prosthetic leg, also became a wheelchair user. Despite all of this, she continued to paint and attend exhibitions. Her fame increased, but unfortunately, in 1954, she passed away, but obviously not without leaving a legacy of amazing art, an amazing life.

Frida even talk about her beliefs and passions outside of art, politics. She was very strong in the Mexican socialist movement. Her life is fascinating, and it's worth reading and learning so much about her. She's really an amazing person, so much behind her art.

Maddie: Yeah, definitely. Now that we've gotten a little more insight into life, let's dive in and do a few pieces that specifically highlight themes of disability in her art.

For folks who are listening or for folks that want to look at some of the art we're talking about as we talk about it, we have a blog on our website called Frida Kahlo, Six Disability-Themed Paintings, but they're also available online. We'll link to those resources in the show notes.

If you go to fridakahlo.org, you can look through various pieces of artwork and they all have visual descriptions depicting the different choices and sceneries of what she painted. It is an accessible way to really get a lot of depth and background into her art.

Keith: Not to mention they have a wonderful timeline, photos, quotes. It's really a fascinating website.

Maddie: Yeah, for sure. Let's jump into it. Let's talk about her art. Kahlo primarily did oil paintings that depicted her reality and her perception of that reality was viewed by others as

strange and somewhat magical. Some people even tried to categorize her as being a surrealist painter, but she really rejected labels sometimes when it came to her paintings.

She famously said, "I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality," which is one of her really big quotes. That quote specifically really calls back to her experience with disability being a woman of color with a disability in a somewhat primarily White's men space in art at the time.

I sometimes think about how her art was covered primarily through a White non-disabled lens at the time and maybe what impact on her. Her paintings and style now are considered to reflect something called magic realism, which was a term coined in 1925.

Not only is the technique and style of her art really important, but again to her perspective and motivation for her art and how she went about even painting with a disability.

Keith: Many people don't know about her disability and how it impacted her art. It is what led to that reality that, to many people at the time, it didn't really make sense and seemed surrealistic, whereas, to her, this was her life. This was how she saw things.

One of the reasons why she did self-portraits so much was not necessarily because that's what she felt she was good at or what she had an interest in, so much as she was often in a bed, unable to move, and she was her own best subject, which is...

Maddie: She wasn't surrounded by people or having people come in and pose for her. Like you said, she was her own best subject because she experienced a bit of that isolation.

Keith: That's right. Because she was often in bed, and a lot of people don't know that she had adaptive equipment, if you will, before such a term existed, I suppose, but she had a custom easel that was built, so that while lying in bed, she could still paint.

She had access to all her supplies next to her and then this easel angled over her bed. That allowed her to paint while lying down, which is fascinating.

Maddie: It's so cool because I feel assistive technology is a fairly popular topic, not in the disability community, but just user experience and integrated user experience. Dare I say, AI is becoming so interesting and involved in people's life and taking things and finding ways to make your life easier and make various parts of navigating your surroundings easier.

She is a picture-perfect depiction of what that has looked like in the past even without necessarily sometimes the words for it. It's because of her experience with disability that she's painted some of the masterpieces we know of today. Some of the themes and commentary throughout her paintings touch on her disability, medical trauma, and chronic pain.

Again, to some, the imagery of her paintings can be fairly dark. That could be due to or related to her pain and the amount of intensive and consistent medical care. We're going to now really start talking about each [indecipherable 13:06]. The first one we have that we want to touch on is the "Tree of Hope, Remain Strong." This is something that she painted later on in her life in 1946.

I'll read the image description to -- for lack of better words -- paint a picture of what [inaudible 13:23] to showcase the visuals of painting while you're listening or reading this podcast. The

description listed on the website said in this painting under the gloomy sky, the sun and moon divides the background into two halves of light and dark.

In the middle, Frida is sitting there and weeping in a red Tehuana costume. Nevertheless, she seems strong and confident. Behind her, on a hospital trolley, is a second Frida who is under anesthesia and has surgical incisions open on her back and still dripping blood.

Frida is holding a pink orthopedic corset while sitting in a wooden chair. On her other hand, she's holding a flag that says Cielito Lindo, Tree of Hope, Remain Strong.

Keith: Also on that flagpole is a red tip that looks like a surgical instrument stained with blood, but it could be a paintbrush dipped in red paint. It can be viewed either way. The barren landscape behind her has two fissures, which is a metaphor for the wounds on her back. Frida painted this painting for her partner, Eduardo Morillo Safa.

In a letter to him, she mentioned that there is a skeleton or death that flees in the face of my will to live. She later removed the skeleton from the painting to please Eduardo. Regardless, she doesn't eliminate the menace of death.

It's in this portrait putting the two Fridas together. One is clearly a victim of a horribly botched tragedy. Yet, the other is quite the heroic survivor. She used it as a retablo, an act of faith, in charge for destiny and becomes her own savior and hero.

Maddie: I feel that's such a good first painting to cover because you really do see the duality of her experience and how she both experienced such intense medical intervention and trauma fairly frequently in her life, while also this other, more beautiful, aesthetically pleasing version of herself, sitting next to her and maybe how the world has perceived her.

I loved this painting, and I was glad that we included it.

Keith: Yeah, definitely. The next painting is called "The Broken Column" that was painted in 1944. In this painting, Frida expresses her anguish and suffering in a very straightforward and quite horrifying way. There are nails stuck into her face and whole body to split from her neck down to her abdomen across her torso. Looks like an earthquake fissure, like her body's literally just splitting open.

In the background is the Earth with dark ravines. In the beginning, she paints herself nude, but then later covers her lower body with something that essentially looks like a hospital sheet. In place of her spine is this column that is The Broken Column. It is on the verge of collapsing. It looks like it's been really about to shatter inside of her.

Maddie: Overall, the painting of Frida exudes strength and beauty. Although her body is supported by this white corset surrounding her and there are these elements of gruesome parts of her chronic pain with the nails and fissures, her face is conveying a message of triumph. She has tears on her face, but she looks straight ahead and is challenging both herself and anybody that's viewing this painting.

Keith: The strokes almost seem very strong. The painting, in some respects, I feel differs from some of her others because it is painted in this style of...It's very bold.

That's intentional because it does come across as she is a very strong individual despite the fact that this shows her as wounded and she's weak in some ways, but her strength of mind and determination outshines that. You can feel it in the painting. It's a really wonderful painting.

Maddie: Yeah, definitely, I agree. We all have art degrees, but I feel that was a great commentary on this painting.

[music]

Andrew Gurza: Well, hello there, and welcome to "Disability after Dark", the podcast shining a bright light on disability stories. I'm your host, disability awareness consultant, Andrew Gurza.

This is a podcast where you sit down with your close disabled friends and talk about things in the disability experience that we never, ever get to shine a light on. That's why it's called Disability After Dark.

Each week we'll explore everything from disability, to ableism, to sexuality, and so much more, including things like disability grief, disability joy, and so many different conversation topics around the disabled experience.

We even have special bonus content like "Quarantine and Chill", a podcast within Disability After Dark where we explore the effects of the ongoing pandemic or a bump in podcast where we talk all about sex and disability and sex toys on the show.

Tune in wherever you get your podcasts and let's shine a bright light on disability stories. Thanks, everybody. Bye.

Woman: Dating with a disability can be hard. I know that [indecipherable 19:11] because I'd [indecipherable 19:13] for years to date successfully with a disability.

Having cerebral palsy, I encountered many people not even considering me as a potential partner and that when they did, they were judgments and attitudes.

But that successful dating and finding a healthy, joyful relationship, it's entirely possible. I finally figured out how to do this. I have been with my husband for over 15 years now. The key is simply keep trying, continue to go for what you want, despite the heartbreak and rejection. Believe in your potential as a dating and relationship partner.

I know that sounds very simple and it's not. That's why I created "Dating Made Easier," the monthly membership that will teach you how to get the results you want, feel more comfortable and confident dating, and give you consistent support with monthly workshops, brainstorming, and networking.

Go to radiantabilities.com/datingresources and join today.

[music]

Maddie: We'll go ahead and jump into the third one we're going to talk about, which is the Wounded Deer. Again, a description of this one. In the painting, Frida is depicted as a young

deer. Her head is her head. She has antlers coming out of what is her head. Then, she has the body of young deer. She is incredibly wounded by arrows that have hit her body.

The background is a forest with dead trees and broken branches, which implies a theme and feeling of fear and desperation. Far away is a stormy, lightning-lit sky which brings some hope but the deer will never be able to reach it.

Keith: This, again, was painted in 1946, the same year that she had an operation on her spine in New York. She hoped that that surgery would free her from much of the severe pain that she experienced in her back on a daily basis, but unfortunately that wasn't the case.

The surgery failed. This painting is, essentially, her expression of disappointment about the operation.

Maddie: You really see that desperation come through in the imagery of the painting, and in her face, and in choosing to make it her on a non-domesticated creature like a deer because it's... That freedom was almost there for her through that surgery. It didn't end up happening and she was still wounded and still remained with her chronic pain.

After she had her surgery and went to Mexico, she started to have depression. In this painting, she shows herself as a young deer. In the lower left-hand corner, she wrote the word karma, which means destiny or fate. She's expressing her sadness that she really can't change her own fate with the body that she lives in and the pain she experiences.

Keith: So much beauty in that. It's amazing. Let me touch on her next painting self-portrait with the portrait of Dr. Farill that was set in 1951. This is her last sign self-portrait. In this self-portraits, she also paints herself with her surgeon, Dr. Juan Farill, who performed the seven surgeries on Frida's spine we referenced earlier. That was in 1951.

She had stayed in the hospital in Mexico City for nine months. Finally, in November of that year, she finally recovered and was able to paint again. This was the first painting that she did at that time and dedicated it to Dr. Farill. She wrote in her diary about this experience, "I was sick for a year. Seven operations on my spine. Dr. Farill saved me."

Maddie: As you get the chance to view it and if you're even imagining it in your mind, it is really such a stunning painting and honestly, it's such an honor. They probably have such a unique relationship because he saved her and she's honoring him with this painting.

It's such a beautiful way to express her gratitude towards an individual that really had an impact on her life, especially in her later years in her life when she was at the height of her, for lack of better word, suffering and navigating her chronic pain and disabilities.

Keith: Yeah, for sure.

Maddie: The second to last painting we're going to talk about is one of my favorites because this is one that really depicts her experience with her medical trauma really well and does not hold back whatsoever and is a bit gruesome to look at. This one is called "Without Hope," and it was done in 1945.

As a result of her many surgeries and illnesses, she didn't have much of an appetite. She became very thin and malnourished because of that. She end up having to have forced bed rest and had to eat pureed food very often, every two hours, it states. In this painting, the description of the painting says that she went through with the force-feeding diet.

The imagery of the painting is her laying on her back with this contraption in front of her with a funnel into her mouth. There are just animals and skulls and just disgusting food falling into the funnel and hanging over it. That's actually supposed to be the same wooden structure that used to be pulled in her canvases that she uses for painting.

She has this reclaimed in technology that she's able to use her painting and now it's almost like it's teasing her and taunting her because she's using it to reflect all of this medical trauma and force eating. It's not known for sure, but it seems that her body isn't visible. It's under a blanket and it's perceived to have her arms pinned underneath the blanket and cannot help the situation.

On the background of the painting is a deserted Mexican landscape showing both the sun and the moon. The painting, it's called Without Hope again. It just exudes a bit of that desperation and hopelessness that calls back to the name of the painting.

Keith: This is one of my favorites too because where the other ones are...This is her reality, of course, but also, there is a bit of an impression of what this is like for her.

I like that's mixed into the reality of it and you see this really grotesque thing hanging over her like you described and it's all going into this little tiny tube that goes into her mouth. To me, it's very fascinating image and you can feel her disgust by the situation.

Maddie: That's such a, again, call back to what we said at the beginning of the episode that people in the art community and anybody who perceived her paintings really viewed them as weird or strange. This is how she lived. This was her reality. Although it might be a very strong way to depict it, this is how she perceived it. I feel like that needs to be honored.

The disability side of her paintings needs to be honored more because her disability and her medical trauma played a huge role into the formation of her paintings, and this one is probably the most stark example of the medical trauma she experienced.

Keith: Yeah, agreed. We've got one more. This is called "Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird." This one was in 1940. In this portrait, Frida Kahlo faces the viewer with a background of large green leaves and a yellow leaf right behind her. The thorns around her neck like a necklace, and it's being held by a black monkey.

Her neck is bleeding from the piercing thorns, and on the right side, behind her shoulder, is a black cat. A hummingbird is hanging on the thorn, which knots around her throat, but yet her expression is very calm and solemn.

It seems like she's just patiently enduring all of this, which obviously is symbolic of her pain. This is her, I have no choice. This is my life, and I'm going to be patient and deal with it.

Maddie: In present day too, as someone who has a variety of disabilities and experiences, chronic pain myself and then folks with chronic pain and disabilities can probably resonate with this, there is an element of just, this is my life.

I might be in an immense amount of pain, but if I want to achieve the things I want to and be the person I want to be, I need to be strong and dare of some of this that I'm experiencing. That doesn't negate the pain. You can still see that her neck is bleeding from these thorns and she's trapped in this state where she needs to be upright and stay still, so she doesn't get injured more.

People with chronic illness and chronic pain specifically can really resonate with that need to maintain your health and do everything and do the best you can to keep your body where it is so that you don't endure more pain while also acknowledging that it's not going to change. A lot of those themes can really resonate with folks today.

As Keith mentioned, there's a variety of different creatures included in this painting, including the hummingbird, the cat, and the monkey. She was not really painting something that was realistic or something she necessarily experienced. She specifically used these three animals and creatures to express her feelings.

The bird, largely in art, symbolizes freedom and life, especially a hummingbird which is colorful and likes to hover above flowers and is often perceived as untouchable by humans because it is so fast and small. In the painting, the hummingbird is black and lifeless and just hanging there.

This might be a callback to Frida herself because of what she experienced and her pain and the fact that she had so many surgeries and spent so many of her years living from her bed and not being able to have children. This painting really showcases that suffering.

While she's present in her body and appears strong and is almost in a, like you said, patiently enduring the pain, there's a form of acceptance there, but that doesn't negate the pain that she's experiencing.

Keith: There's so many symbols in here. When you really look at it, there's butterflies in her hair. It looks like dragonflies. It's just there's so much in this painting that every time I look at it again, I feel I see something else. All of it is just symbolic and expresses how she felt. It's amazing.

Maddie: These are only six paintings that we chose to talk about because we want to give ample time to talk about and talk through the visual descriptions and really showcase and allow you to visualize what the art looks like if you're unable to view it. These, like I said, are just six of her paintings. You could argue that disability shows up in all of her paintings.

You can find a way to find her experience with her medical trauma or chronic pain throughout all of her work, even if it's not at the forefront of the visuals and actually what she painted.

We really hope by touching on these six paintings that you learn more about Frida Kahlo and really learn more about these literal little or known signs of her as a woman of color with her disability, her bisexuality, non-monogamy, and her Mexican identities.

Those all play such a huge part into how her story is depicted through her paintings but also how her story is told in the media and what is and isn't covered.

As we know, especially as you're listening to this podcast, I'm sure you acknowledge and understand that disability is not something that is talked about or is referenced in art or in media, and you're coming here maybe to learn more about how that shows up in maybe art and media spaces. We encourage you to check out more of her work and works with other disabled folks after listening to this podcast.

If you know also of any disabled artists and you want to email those to us or comment on our social media post about this podcast or if you share it on your own accounts or with a friend and find disabled artists, definitely, take the time to send us those folks.

I feel art and disability, especially we could have a whole conversation about how a lot of the most famous artists had mental illness and experienced a lot of hardships in their lives that would lead to disability as a result.

Really centering disability when we talk about art is really important, and this is just a podcast to get you started in that convo. Really hope you appreciated this convo about Frida.

Keith: Yeah, definitely. As you were saying that, Maddie, I was thinking to myself, we have a few past episodes that deal with disability representation in the media. The unfortunate reality of it being that it's often portrayed in a negative or sad way or to be pitied or even just to be considered less than in some regard.

Even if someone is triumphant, it's usually because of someone else's pity or someone else's work, whatever. It's unfortunately rare and hard to find real true positive representations. Here we go back to the '30s and '40s and early '50s and see such strong messaging in her art and showing how strong she felt and how powerful she was is something that's very...I don't know. To me, it's enlightening.

I'm really glad that we went through this and talked about this because it's nice to see that though it's been around. We just may not have recognized it sometimes.

Maddie: Right. That's such a huge point, especially as we're starting to get some disability representation in the media. Alice Wong is on "Human Resources". There's kid's shows that are coming out with disabled characters with differences or being the main characters in shows. I think that's really exciting, but it's not new.

This isn't new. Talented folks with disabilities have always been around. It's just a matter of centering their story and giving credit where credit is due and acknowledging that maybe in the past disability, and covering disability, and centering it as a frame for artwork hasn't been done until we had the language later on previous years to talk about it.

Some of it is going back and doing that giggling and being like, "Whoa. This art really is about disability. Maybe the [indecipherable 36:49], or Frida, or whoever at the time didn't have the language to call it that for us to easily find those disabled artists and creators in decades before us.

I feel like continuing to have these conversations, and honoring disabled folks, and talking about disabled artists and creators, and talking about disability in every frame of life is the point of this

podcast. Calling attention to it, I hope that folks enjoyed it and take something away that they're able to share with someone else, and keep talking about disability.

Keith: For sure. We'd love for you to share this episode with others. As we mentioned, we'll have show notes and links to a lot of the resources we talked about, including the blog posts so you can go through, read through it, see the pictures, click the links, and enjoy your own experience discovering Frida Kahlo and her art, her identities, her disability.

Maddie: Thanks so much for listening. Wherever you're listening, just so you know, we're on all streaming platforms. We also have the transcript available on our website.

For more information and to read the podcast, you can visit disabilityrightsflorida.org/podcast.

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