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### Triumph over pain



Young artists from Mawaheb, with heart-rending stories of their own, poignantly identify with the struggles of the great Frida Kahlo

By Jyoti Kalsi Special to Weekend Review  
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Image Credit:

Sweet smell of success Sharan Budhrani

The latest exhibition at Showcase gallery, “Frida Kahlo by Mawaheb”, is a celebration of the life and work of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo. But it also celebrates the talent and spirit of the young artists from Mawaheb who have created the works featured in the show. Mawaheb, which is the Arabic word for “talent”, is an art studio for adults with special needs. And the reason these young artists chose to do a show about a Mexican artist born more than a century ago is that they identify strongly with her.

It all started when the 2002 film “Frida” was screened at the studio. As Kahlo’s life story unfolded on screen, the artists saw how a bus crash in her youth caused such serious injuries that she had to have several surgeries and spend three months wrapped in a full body cast to heal her broken bones and spinal column. They were inspired by her resilience and courage as she began painting while still confined to her bed. And they empathised with her when her tempestuous relationship with her husband, renowned Mexican artist Diego Rivera, added to her suffering.

“The film had a huge impact on our artists. They were curious to learn more about Kahlo. Together we read articles about her, listened to her interviews and studied her paintings in detail. Gulshan Kavarana, our art teacher, asked them to think about what inspired them the most and to write down their thoughts before starting the paintings. Kahlo is known for her powerful insights about national identity, the plight of the poor and the march of technology. But what our artists connected with was the portrayal of her body wracked with pain. Her husband’s betrayal also affected them deeply because they know about trust and betrayal in their own dealings with the world,” says Wemmy De Maaker, founder of Mawaheb.

In fact, the artists were so upset with Rivera that they refused to include him in their paintings. Most of their paintings are inspired by Kahlo's poignant self-portraits that depict her isolation and pain as well as her sense of self and indomitable spirit. "This is natural because our artists have also triumphed over pain and battled with isolation and like Frida, they too have a flamboyant sense of the dramatic," De Maaker says.

The artworks in the show include monumental works on which the artists worked together as well as individual creations. Three painted plaster corsets alluding to Kahlo's spinal injury are also part of the show. The canvases are filled with the bright colours, flowers, leaves, butterflies, humming birds, parrots and monkeys that Kahlo often used as symbols of tenderness and protection.

The paintings acquire a deeper meaning when one listens to the artists speak about their bond with Kahlo. Abdullah Lutfi, has created several portraits as well as a series of drawings based on Kahlo's well-known images of a deer wounded by several arrows, a female body pierced with nails, of herself waiting at the bus stand before the terrible accident and other drawings symbolising her husband's unfaithfulness and her inability to have children. "I paint the brokenness of my body like Frida," he says.

Alex Loveday has written down his feelings on his canvases. "When people hurt me or laugh at me, my body starts to hurt and I feel like I have been punched all over. I guess Frida felt like that all the time," he says.

For Sharan Budhrani, being part of this show has been extra special because a French perfumer who visited the

gallery was inspired by his painting to create a new perfume. The young artist, who is wheelchair bound due to muscular dystrophy, says, "Frida did not let anything stop her from painting and that inspires me. Her life made me realise that the most important thing in life is to accept yourself and know who you are. It is amazing to know that people want to buy my work and it has inspired a perfume," he says. His mother Mansha Anil is overjoyed. "Mawaheb and art have changed my son from a shy, withdrawn person into a happy and confident young man. I am overwhelmed to know that his painting has inspired a perfume and thankful that art is enabling my child to live his life to the full," she says.

For De Maaker, this exhibition is in an important milestone. "This show is a celebration of survival against all odds, of overcoming pain and isolation and maintaining a sense of self. The fact that Showcase gallery invited us to exhibit our work here means a lot to us, because it shows that our artists have reached a certain standard. We want to tell society to look beyond the wheelchair, the autism or the disability, at the person and the talent. It has been three years since we opened Mawaheb and I am so excited and proud to reach this point where we are having exhibitions in galleries in Dubai and art lovers want to buy our work. Our aim is to also use art as a medium to teach the artists life skills. And exhibitions like these are helping them to gain confidence and develop their communication skills," she says.

Jyoti Kalsi is an arts enthusiast based in Dubai.

"Frida Kahlo by Mawaheb" will run at Showcase gallery, Al Quoz, until January 15, 2014.

## BOX

### Mawaheb's fashion outing

Designer Reem Al Banna has incorporated some of the paintings in the latest collection from her label Reemami, with part of the sale proceeds going to the studio.

SIDEBAR to be Used as Deep caption with mosaic tiles pic:

Silent Auction: Mawaheb organises weekly workshops in pottery and mosaic painting for its artists. So the artists decided to create a monumental portrait of Kahlo using glass tiles, beads and handcrafted clay flowers and leaves. The portrait has been put on silent auction with a minimum bid of Dh15,000. "Every artist worked on one area of this ambitious project, aided by volunteers. The project, which took about three months, is a labour of love and a fitting tribute to Frida. The mosaic, made up of hundreds of little pieces painstakingly put together, brings to mind Frida's comment: 'I think little by little I will be able to solve my problems and survive,'" says Wemmy De Maaker, founder of Mawaheb.