The Suicide of Dorothy Hale: A Recuerdo, a Criticism and Frida’s Self-Search

The Suicide of Dorothy Hale is an oil on Masonite panel with painted frame executed by iconic twentieth-century artist Frida Kahlo (Fig. 1). The painting, although measuring only 20 x 16 inches, is incredibly powerful in its depiction of Hale’s violent demise. Completed in a traditional Mexican ex-voto form, the scene presents both a visual and a written account of Hale’s death.¹ This recuerdo depicts three stages of a young woman jumping out of a New York City skyscraper. The first two stages, in which the figure is captured during her fall, appear very small and are softened by blue, white and grey cloud-like coloring, while the last stage, in which Hale’s lifeless body lies on the ground, is vivid and striking. This makes a viewer feel immeasurable sadness over the loss of a person’s life.² The Suicide of Dorothy Hale is not only a dedication to a woman’s tragic life but also a criticism of the culture that destroyed her. While it commemorates Hale, it also chronicles Frida’s resentment towards her own life, which scarred her both physically and emotionally. Ultimately, this scene of death becomes much more than a memorial, it becomes a veiled representation of Frida’s own suffering.

The painting manages to powerfully depict the inner struggle that Dorothy Hale went through before ending her own life. Hale was an actress, showgirl, and socialite. Her career

¹ Michael Komanecky and James K Ballinger, Phoenix Art Museum: Collection Highlights (New York), 204
started to go downhill after her husband, Gardiner Hale died in a car accident. After the incident, Dorothy began failing her screen tests, was in severe financial trouble and lived on the money her friends gave her.\(^3\) On October 20, 1938, she organised a farewell party for her close friends at her Hampshire House apartment and told them that soon, she would be taking a long trip. After the party was over, Hale wrote goodbye letters to her friends, put on her most expensive black velvet dress with a yellow corsage and jumped out of the window to her death.

During this time Frida was in New York, preparing for her solo exhibition at the Julien Levy Gallery.\(^4\) When she learned of Hale’s death she proposed a *recuerdo* to their mutual friend, Clare Boothe Luce. Luce, expecting that Frida would execute something similar to her beautifully captivating self-portraits, paid $400 and decided to give the completed painting to Hale’s mother. However, the painting turned out to be nothing like Kahlo’s typical portraits. What she completed was an ex-voto, a narrative painting made to give thanks for an act of divine intercession. Traditionally, such a painting depicts the event as well as the saints responsible for it, and thanks them for the continuation of life despite the most horrendous misfortunes.\(^5\) Upon receiving Kahlo’s painting, which shows the brutal event in precise details, Luce, as she later recalled, almost fainted. Furious, she called two of Frida’s friends to witness the destruction of the painting. One of them, the sculptor Isamu Noguchi, managed to change Luce’s mind and instead covered up a banner and an inscription that listed Luce’s name.

The painting is indeed staggering in its depiction of Hale’s tragic end. We see her figure falling from a fantasy world to the ground of harsh reality. She is shown first jumping from her

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\(^5\) J. C. Harris, “The Suicide of Dorothy Hale,” *Archives of General Psychiatry* 60, no. 7 (July 2003): 661.
Hampshire House apartment, home to her illusions and hopes; at the end of the fall, placed right above her lifeless body, this building becomes a tombstone forever defining Hale’s life. The apartment building is painted in white, symbolizing the innocence and naiveness of Hale’s character. It is surrounded by chaotic white-grey clouds just like the chaos that existed in the woman’s life. During the slow fall, her entire figure is covered in these swirling, ghost-like clouds, perhaps symbolizing the troubles that constantly haunted Hale. It is only after she reaches the ground that she becomes free from this life-long suffocation. Her gaze is placidly focused on the viewer - we see no pain, judgment or horror in her eyes, instead only the relief of an escape. Hale lies in the foreground, beautifully intact rather than destroyed, with her gaze offering no excuses and indicating full certainty in the decision.

Apart from conveying the tragedy of Hale’s suicide, Frida also criticises the social values that drove this young woman to such desperation. Before committing suicide and seeking help, Hale went to her friend Bernard Baruch who was an influential social and political figure in New York City at the time. Instead of help, however, Baruch told her that she was too old to continue her acting career and suggested buying the “most beautiful dress in New York” in order to find a rich husband. Hale subsequently bought a $1000 black Madame X dress and wore it when she ended her life. In the painting, the black dress is “cursed” because it represents the demoralizing values of “Gringolandia” (the word Frida Kahlo used to criticise the “miserable” way of living in North America). In paintings where the artist herself wears European clothing, she is often weak and passive, unable to control her own destiny, just like Dorothy Hale was. Despite the fact that

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6 Harris, “The Suicide of Dorothy Hale.” 662.
7 Cullen and Museo del Barrio (New York, N.Y.), Nexus New York. 36.
in the foreground Hale is lifeless with blood coming out of her ears and mouth, her dress looks untouched. The black velvet remains intact just like the degrading culture that destroyed its owner. Frida painted this attire carefully, with soft brush movements and much more clarity than other details in the painting. The dark, heavy black color contrasts with the light, heavenly blue background and symbolizes Hale finally facing cruel reality as she literally “comes down to earth.”

The ex-voto is placed in a painted frame magnifying the shock that the scene leaves in a viewer. The surreal blue sky pours over the wooden frame, transfers beyond the border of its board and reaches the viewer’s world, just like the blood dripping from Hale’s body. The picture is chilling; it captivates us and hints at the haunting feeling of solitude that possessed the woman at the very last minutes of her life. At the bottom of the painting, a sickening obituary, as if written in Hale’s blood, reads in Spanish: “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 [section deleted by Luce], this retablo was executed by Frida Kahlo.” There is a sense of absoluteness that the writing brings - if before the fall everything has a dreamlike quality, at the bottom, we get a sense of clarity. Frida uses depth to make this obvious separation. The ground on which Hale lies is painted in dark brown with shadows giving it a naturalistic look, at the same time the woman’s left leg is reaching out of the painting in a trompe l’oeil effect adding to the gruesomeness of the image. The ground leaves an impression of a stage and therefore, the fall becomes Hale’s final, defining act.

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9 Oriana Baddeley, “‘Her Dress Hangs Here’: De-Frocking the Kahlo Cult,” 14.
Although the painting is truly appalling to viewers, it may have carried more nuanced meaning to the artist herself, suggesting a desirable end to suffering. At the age of 18, Frida was hit by a trolley, which resulted in three fractures of the pelvis, fractures of the right foot and dislocation of the shoulder along with several spinal injuries.\textsuperscript{10} For the remainder of her life, she had to deal with the consequences of the tragic incident - she underwent more than thirty surgical procedures and the amputation of her leg. In addition to enduring physical pain, during the period in which the painting was executed, Frida also faced problems in her marriage. Having discovered that her husband, Diego Rivera, had had an affair with her sister, the painter started experiencing suicidal thoughts. This is captured in the way Frida painted Hale’s expression. The woman looks completely peaceful, there is even a sense of solace and comfort in her eyes. At the same time, her fall is graceful and gentle, looking as simple as a dive in the water instead of a death jump. Perhaps, Frida saw Hale’s decision as medicine to her lifelong pain, medicine that would cure her too.

\textit{The Suicide of Dorothy Hale} is indeed a deeply felt and moving work of art. It powerfully depicts not only the act of suicide but also the suffering that drove Hale to this point. Apart from commemorating one woman’s life and loss, this recuerdo also criticises American social values at the time. Although the painting looks disturbing to us, for Frida the scene perhaps brought much-needed peace. She died in 1958, after long bodily and emotional suffering. Speculation that her death was, in fact, a suicide, remain till this day.

\textsuperscript{10} Harris, “The Suicide of Dorothy Hale.” 661.
Fig. 1 Frida Kahlo, *The Suicide of Dorothy Hale*, 1938 (Phoenix Art Museum)