

## When Art Imitates Pain

Therapy Group for Hispanic Women Uses Kahlo as a Starting Point

By ABEER ALLAM

The psychologist handed a painting by Frida Kahlo to a woman in a group therapy session for depression recently at a Brooklyn hospital.

"I want you to tell me what you see here," the psychologist, María Sesin, said in Spanish. "What are you thinking about when you see this? How do you interpret it and relate it to your own lives?"

The woman, Cricelva Villicres, 52, started to cry. "This is a united family," she said. "I cannot identify with them. There was so much violence and blood between my mother and father."

The painting, "My Parents, My Grandparents and I," shows Kahlo as a naked child holding a blood-red ribbon connecting her to portraits of her parents and grandparents. The 11 women gathered around a long table at Lutheran Medical Center in Sunset Park took turns looking at it. When it was her turn, Vilma, who is 59, said: "It makes me feel very lonely. I have two children, but I am always alone. I do not have a family like this one." Vilma, who lives in Prospect Park, spoke on the condition that her last name not be used, to protect her privacy.

The painting is one of 12 works by Kahlo that Dr. Sesin uses to treat Hispanic women who are suffering from depression, have been abused and have physical illnesses. The sessions are in Spanish, and the paintings help the women feel more comfortable discussing their traumatic experiences.

Though the effectiveness of her novel practice has not been extensively evaluated, Dr. Sesin said Kahlo resonated with the women in her group not only because she was Mexican but also because she confronted some of the same emotional and physical problems. The paintings used in the therapy touch on themes like infidelity, violence, male dominance and infertility.

"This was an attempt to develop treatment that was culturally sensitive," said Dr. Sesin, who works at the mental health center at Lutheran Medical Center, adding that she has used Kahlo's artwork to treat about 60 women in the last eight years. "The beauty of this artwork therapy is that it brings out each individual's history, each individual's narrative."

In the paintings, Dr. Sesin said, Kahlo was brutally honest about her own troubles, like her turbulent marriage to the muralist Diego Rivera and the excruciating and chronic pain she endured after a bus accident. These kinds of paintings are especially helpful in opening the door, she said, for Hispanic women who are often too embarrassed to speak about intimate family matters.

Vilma said studying Kahlo's paintings helped her unlock and confront the painful memory of the three years of sexual abuse by her stepfather while she was growing up in El Salvador. "When I see Frida's problems, I do not feel ashamed of my problems anymore," said Vilma. "She, too, had physical and emotional problems like me."

Dr. Sesin's use of Kahlo's art in her practice emerged from a desire to serve the growing Hispanic community that has grown around Lutheran Medical Center.



Angel Franco/The New York Times

The paintings of Frida Kahlo help women open up in group therapy for depression at Lutheran Medical Center in Brooklyn.

### Tears, narratives and common ground as images tell an artist's story of suffering.

The kind of one-on-one talk therapy that works with most patients does not always work as well with Hispanics, particularly those from places where seeking help for mental health problems is not as common as it is here, she said.

Her method built upon the work of Dr. Giuseppe Costantino, a psychologist and the clinical director of the mental health center at Lutheran Medical Center. In the late 1980's he developed a form of therapy geared toward children and their parents that used Latino folk tales. But Dr. Sesin wanted something aimed specifically at adults and chose Kahlo's work because it is vivid and personal. "She belongs to us, to our culture," said Dr. Sesin, who was born in Cuba and has a doctorate in psychology from Yeshiva University.

While Dr. Costantino supports the approach, he said more study, including a comparison of Dr. Sesin's form of therapy with others, was needed to assess its effectiveness. Dr. Sesin said that besides the 13-week Kahlo session, her patients also took medication for depression and continued with regular group therapy.

At the recent meeting, Dr. Sesin picked a painting called, "A Few Small Nips," in

which a man stands next to a naked woman on a bed who is covered in blood appears to be dead. One of Dr. Sesin's patients, Marta Gutierrez, started weeping.

"I really identify with this painting because the father of my children stabbed me with a knife in my breast when I was seven months pregnant," said Ms. Gutierrez, 54.

Ms. Gutierrez, who is from Puerto Rico and now lives in Sunset Park, said the father of her five children routinely beat her. He kidnapped their infant daughter but was eventually arrested, and she got her baby back, she said. Though she left him and now lives with another man, Ms. Gutierrez said her mental wounds never healed. In 2000, her 26-year-old daughter died of a drug overdose, leaving behind six children. "I lost my faith in God, and I went crazy," Ms. Gutierrez said.

Wrestling with severe depression, she sought help in 2001. Psychiatrists put her on antidepressants, and she started one-on-one therapy before joining the group therapy in March. The medication helped, she said, but the group therapy and the Kahlo paintings led her to understand that she was not alone. "Sometimes it hurts when you see the paintings that make you remember your past," Ms. Gutierrez said. "But you feel relaxed after you take out what you have inside. I feel much better when I tell others about my experiences."

Ms. Villicres, who grew up in the Dominican Republic and lives in Sunset Park, said looking at Kahlo paintings of families together reminded her of the day

she saw her father bang her mother's head into the wall and her mother slash his face.

Though she vowed never to tolerate such treatment, Ms. Villicres married a man who became abusive. Her husband hit her, cut her off from her family and slept with other women in their bedroom, she said. He would bring her the phone to call the police whenever he hit her, knowing that she would not make the call because she was an illegal immigrant at the time. Eventually, she found the fortitude to leave him.

Still, Ms. Villicres said she felt consumed by depression over her relationship, whose violence she felt responsible for.

Ms. Villicres said the weeks spent in Dr. Sesin's group therapy had made her more assertive. She reacted with anger looking at one Kahlo painting in which Rivera towers over an image of Kahlo half his size. "How come such an intelligent and powerful person could be so submissive to him?" she asked. "How come she is not equal to him in the painting? How come she put up with so much suffering?" Dr. Sesin said that a woman could be smart but lack emotional intelligence.

Ms. Villicres remained frustrated by the image, but she said that reflecting on the various paintings had helped her look at life differently. "When you see art and all things you can do for yourself, it is wonderful," Ms. Villicres said. "I wish we were happy. We cannot change what we have suffered already, but we can start changing things."