

FIONA GREGORY

*Death, Fashion, and Feeling:
Reading around The Suicide of Dorothy Hale (1939)*

Shortly after her first New York exhibition opened at the Julian Levy Gallery in late 1938, Frida Kahlo commenced work on a new painting, titled *El Suicidio de Dorothy Hale (The Suicide of Dorothy Hale)*. The finished work is dominated by swathes of white cloud extending across the top three-quarters of the canvas and into the frame. A high-rise building with distinctive stepped white façade and slanted roof emerges from the clouds, only its upper levels clearly visible. Against this backdrop a figure is depicted in two moments: at the top she is upright, a tiny form clothed in black, appearing little more than a dark speck against the skyscraper. In the mid-section of the painting the figure has been inverted, falling head first with arms outstretched; furthermore the perspective has changed so she appears closer, and the details of her hair, face and body are clearer. The perspective shifts again in the bottom quarter of the painting, as does the scene, which no longer depicts the high-rise building swimming in clouds, but a bare, brown expanse—a patch of earth or an empty stage—and the falling woman closer again but now prone and lifeless, blood dripping from her body and seeping into the frame. As the title indicates, the painting was based on an actual incident—the recent suicide of actress and socialite Dorothy Hale, a woman whom Kahlo had known personally. The painting had been commissioned by another friend of Hale’s, Clare Boothe Luce, hereafter referred to as “Boothe.” Boothe—writer, former editor of *Vanity Fair*, future politician, and wife of publishing magnate Henry Luce—had attended the opening night at the Levy Gallery and the two women had discussed Hale’s death and how her life might be remembered. Kahlo delivered the finished painting to Boothe in the summer of 1939, however the latter was horrified by the artist’s approach to the subject and the work was suppressed for several decades. It is now held in the Phoenix Art Museum.

In this paper, I examine the narratives surrounding this painting’s creation and reception, looking in particular for what it tells us of the figure at the centre of

the work, Dorothy Hale herself, a woman who is now chiefly remembered through her association with Kahlo and Boothe. I am also interested in the ways these three women are bound together by the painting, and by the network of emotion that circulates around it. Kahlo's painting functions as a performance of friendship—an intimate offering to Hale's memory. The dead or dying woman has long been a subject in the visual arts, from the Renaissance "Death and the Maiden" tradition of depicting beautiful women in companion with death, through the plethora of nineteenth-century images of the drowning Ophelia,¹ to the early twentieth-century fascination with the death mask of L'Inconnue de la Seine.² Such images, however, have overwhelmingly been executed by men. Kahlo's painting makes the significance of relationships between women the focus, as the artist's original inscription to the portrait makes clear:

In the city of New York on the 21st of the month of OCTOBER, 1938, at six in the morning, Mrs DOROTHY HALE committed suicide by throwing herself out of a very high window of the Hampshire House building. In her memory Mrs CLARE BOOTHE LUCE commissioned this *retablo*, having executed it FRIDA KAHLO.³

Yet even as the painting stands as a testament to friendship, it reveals complexities in these women's relationships with one another, and the presence, power and persistence of darker, less noble emotions. Here, I consider the meanings built around Hale by Kahlo and Boothe and consider what their responses to her death reveal of their feelings for their friend and her predicament.

¹ Notable examples include John Everett Millais, *Ophelia* (1851-1852); Eugène Delacroix, *The Death of Ophelia* (1853); and Alexandre Cabanel, *Ophelia* (1883).

² *L'Inconnue de la Seine* refers to the death mask said to have been taken from an unknown woman whose body was found in the Paris river in the 1800s. The mask became a popular decorative object in France and Germany and inspired artists and writers, becoming an "archetypal image of fatal femininity," Magda Romanska, "NecrOphelia: Death, Femininity and the Making of Modern Aesthetics," *Performance Research* 10.3 (2005): 35-53 (38).

³ Frida Kahlo, trans. from the Spanish by Hayden Herrera, in *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), 293.

Dorothy Donovan Hale

Dorothy Hale's attempts to establish an acting career in the early 1920s had amounted to little more than a role in the chorus of a long-running Broadway musical.⁴ She tried to revive her career following the death of her second husband, artist Gardner Hale, in 1931. Her striking looks secured her a Hollywood screen test, which led to an uncredited appearance in *Cynara*, directed by King Vidor in 1932, and a small, featured role in Alexander Korda's production *The Rise of Catherine the Great* in 1934. However, these ventures into film did not result in further work in Hollywood. Hale soon returned to New York, where she was cast in the regional try-outs of Clare Boothe Luce's play *Abide With Me*, but was replaced for the New York opening. Following this engagement, her career appears to have faltered.⁵

Despite her professional disappointments, Hale remained a feature of the New York social scene, occupying the alternative identity of "celebrated beauty" and befriended by prominent artists, politicians and socialites. In the year preceding her death, Hale was romantically linked to Harry Hopkins, political advisor and confidant to President Franklin Roosevelt.⁶ In the narrative built around her during her lifetime, in the press at the time of her death, and in the later testimony of friends, Hale's beauty is her currency. In a 1983 interview with Kahlo's biographer, Hayden Herrera, Boothe described Hale as "one of the most beautiful women I have ever known." Offering a useful measure of Hale's

⁴ Hale is listed under her maiden name, Dorothy Donovan, as one of the "Ladies of the Ensemble" for the musical *Lady Be Good*, which opened in December 1924 and starred siblings Fred and Adele Astaire. Dorothy Donovan was still listed amongst the Ensemble in May 1925. Playbills for *Lady Be Good* are held in the Billy Rose Theatre division of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁵ Considering America was in the midst of the Depression it was an inauspicious time to be attempting to find work as an actor. According to Daniel J. Watermeier, by 1934 there were 5000 unemployed Equity members in New York; "Actors and Acting," in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*, Vol 2, 1870-1945, ed. Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 446-86 (483).

⁶ *The New York Journal and American* noted Hale had met Hopkins in early 1937 and the social corps of both New York and Washington expected a summer wedding to be announced. Such an announcement never eventuated and the relationship ended in mid 1938; Cholly Knickerbocker (Maury Paul), "Mrs Hale's Love Rift Revealed," *New York Journal and American*, October 22, 1938, Dorothy Hale Clippings File, NYPL.

beauty for more recent audiences, she told Herrera: “Not even the young Elizabeth Taylor, whom she resembled, was more beautiful.”⁷ In some of the press reporting around her death, Dorothy Hale is referred to simply as “Beauty.”⁸

Dorothy Hale died at the age of thirty-three in New York City on October 21, 1938 after falling from her high-rise apartment in the Hampshire House building. The death was ruled a suicide and the press engaged in lengthy speculation on the circumstances that might have driven Hale to such an act.⁹ The *New York Journal and American’s* “Cholly Knickerbocker” gossip column (at that time under the authorship of Maury Paul) identified the failure of her relationship with Hopkins as one possible cause. The paper noted Hale had met Hopkins in early 1937, around the time, the *Journal* points out, she moved to her apartment in Hampshire House.¹⁰ Alongside reports of her professional disappointments, the failure of this relationship was repeatedly evoked in the press and became an integral part of Hale’s story.

Another key feature of the narrative surrounding Hale’s suicide was a party she held the day before her death. A number of press reports stressed the party had faltered in some way, with one writer going so far as to suggest the experience of the party itself propelled her to suicide. In this rendering, the party was not a purely social exercise but an effort by Hale to re-launch her stage career. However the gathering proved “pathetic,” a “failure” when the “most distinguished of the invited guests remained away.”¹¹ Reports of the party

⁷ Herrera, *Frida Kahlo*, 290.

⁸ “Pictures Tell Beauty’s Life Story,” *New York Journal and American*, October 22, 1938, Dorothy Hale Clippings File, NYPL.

⁹ Myra Bairstow has recently launched a website and blog offering a more detailed examination of the circumstances surrounding Hale’s death and disputing aspects of the received story. See *The Official Dorothy Hale Blog*, <http://official-dorothy-hale.blogspot.com.au>. A full engagement with Bairstow’s propositions is beyond the scope of this paper; here I restrict my analysis to how Hale’s death was represented in the contemporary press and subsequently in Kahlo’s painting.

¹⁰ Knickerbocker, “Mrs Hale’s Love Rift Revealed.”

¹¹ “Mrs Hale Died as ‘Life Failure’,” *New York Journal and American*, Dorothy Hale Clippings File, NYPL.

supported the overall impression created in the press of Hale as a woman disappointed in her attempts to find love, work or social position. Yet alongside the examples of social and professional failure are repeated references to her luxury apartment, lavish wardrobe, glamorous friends and enviable lifestyle, all accompanied by large-scale photographic reminders of Hale's beauty. The juxtaposition of markers of pity and of envy—of heartache, insomnia and financial worries experienced *even as* one is enjoying cocktails at the Twenty-One Club with Mrs Morgan Pierpont Hamilton—renders Hale an enigmatic and arresting presence in these narratives:

She sought fame on stage, screen and radio, and failure followed every venture. She became a member of the so-called café society, a companion of the wealthy idlers, popular artists, powerful theatrical producers. They availed her nothing. She brought beauty, charm and gaiety to the group—but either she lacked the essential ingredient for success or was predestined for failure.¹²

The Apartment, the Dress, and the Corsage

Kahlo's painting incorporates details that locate her representation of Hale within a specific moment—New York, 1938—and highlight key aspects of the dead woman's identity. These details include the Hampshire House apartment building, Hale's "Madame X" dress, and the yellow corsage she wore the night of her death.

Hale's apartment was on the sixteenth floor of the Hampshire House building at 150 Central Park South. Hampshire House was designed in 1931 as "a thirty-six-story mix of Regency and Art Deco, rising in a series of white-brick setbacks to a giant pyramidal copper roof."¹³ Funding difficulties delayed completion of the project until 1937, by which point designer Dorothy Draper had been invited on board. In architectural historian Christopher Gray's estimation, Draper "redesigned the public rooms into some of the most significant interiors of the '30s or '40s, with daring contrasts of black, white, and turquoise, overscale

¹² "Mrs Hale Died."

¹³ Christopher Gray with Suzanne Braley, *New York Streetscapes: Tales of Manhattan's Significant Buildings and Landmarks* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003), 199.

plaster carving, mirrors and glass block and extraordinary door moldings of cast clear glass.”¹⁴ The Cholly Knickerbocker newspaper column frames the exclusive Hampshire House as a curious and inappropriate choice of abode for Hale: friends who knew her relationship with Harry Hopkins had ended “were mystified at her leasing such an expensive apartment. For they also knew she had only a very modest income from Gardner Hale’s estate.”¹⁵ The spectacular manner of her death was one aspect of Hale’s suicide that brought it to public attention—“Falls from 16th Story” shouted part of one headline.¹⁶ The high-rise building represented the hope and promise of modernity. That Hale could choose this wonder as the vehicle for her death fascinated and horrified contemporary New Yorkers—one newspaper published a photograph of the exterior of Hampshire House with an arrow marking the window of the apartment and the trajectory of her fall.¹⁷ The thick black-and-white arrow tracing the path from the sixteenth floor to the sidewalk is the clearest feature of this picture, and makes the mode of death the most compelling part of the story. The spectacle of her death also enhanced the sense of Hale as victim of modernity—here was a young woman who had tried, but failed, to establish herself in the metropolis.

The Hampshire House apartment was the location of the party Hale held the day before her death. Clare Boothe was invited to the party but refused to attend because she was angry with Hale over a dress. Fashion looms large in this story and, as Oriana Baddeley notes, performs “an important symbolic function” within it.¹⁸ Boothe told Kahlo’s biographer, Hayden Herrera, that she had gifted Hale five hundred dollars to assist with her rent. Shortly afterwards, Boothe was admiring a beautiful and prohibitively expensive evening gown in the Bergdorf Goodman department store, when she was informed by the sales assistant that it had been ordered by Dorothy Hale. Presuming Hale had used the rent money she’d given her to buy the dress, Boothe declined Hale’s invitation to the party

¹⁴ Gray, *New York Streetscapes*, 210.

¹⁵ Knickerbocker, “Mrs Hale’s Love Rift.”

¹⁶ “Beauty Left Suicide Notes in Death Leap,” *Daily Mirror*, October 22, 1938, Dorothy Hale Clippings File, NYPL.

¹⁷ “Pictures Tell.”

¹⁸ Oriana Baddeley, “‘Her Dress Hangs Here’: De-Frocking the Kahlo Cult,” *Oxford Art Journal* 14.1 (1991): 10-17 (14).

but did not explain why. After her friend's death, she discovered the money to buy the dress had in fact been given to Hale by financier Bernard Baruch, to whom she had gone for career advice. Baruch had told Hale that it was too late for her to pursue a profession as an actress and she should concentrate on finding a wealthy husband. To that end he gave her one thousand dollars and told her to buy the most beautiful dress she could find.¹⁹

In her interview with Herrera, Boothe claims she was unaware of Baruch's involvement when she declined Hale's invitation; she describes herself as *furios* with Hale at the thought her friend had spent her money on a gown, a gown of such expensive beauty Boothe felt she could not justify purchasing it for herself. Boothe suggests the guilt and remorse she subsequently felt over her false accusation motivated her commissioning the portrait from Kahlo.²⁰ Thus Boothe's sense of shame becomes a significant factor in the creation of the work.

When Boothe declined Hale's invitation, the latter nevertheless asked her friend for advice on what she should wear to the party. Boothe suggested the black velvet "Madame X" gown she had owned for some time. It was given this name because it recalled John Singer Sargent's 1884 portrait of "Madame X" (Virginie Gautreau) which caused a sensation at the Paris Exhibition for its supposedly brazen display of the sitter's eroticised body. Hale apparently concurred with Boothe's dress suggestion for it was her "Madame X" gown she was wearing at the time of her death, a fact that was eagerly reported in the press: "When her body crashed to the sidewalk Mrs Hale was still wearing [her] black velvet gown."²¹ This is the dress that clothes Hale's lifeless body in Kahlo's painting. As was the fashion, the dress relies for its effect on the cut and fall of the fabric, which accentuates the contours of the body. The reference to it as the "Madame X" gown identifies it as the ultimate marker of the *femme fatale*, an item of clothing that is donned to enhance the wearer's sexual allure. The sexual capital

¹⁹ Herrera, *Frida Kahlo*, 290-92. See also James M. Grant, *Bernard M. Baruch: The Adventures of a Wall Street Legend* (New York: Wiley, 1997), 271.

²⁰ Herrera, *Frida Kahlo*, 291-2.

²¹ "Dorothy Hale Dies in 16-Story Plunge," unidentified fragment, Dorothy Hale Clippings File, NYPL.

of the wearer is further indicated in the only adornment on the dress—a corsage given to Hale by her former lover, the sculptor Isamu Noguchi.²²

Even in death, Hale’s body was considered in terms of what it was wearing. In its report on Hale’s funeral, the *New York Journal and American* noted “the actress’ body rested in a wooden coffin, covered with white broadcloth. Her dress was of white crepe de chine with a corsage of lilies of the valley.” The writer assured readers that “Miss Hale’s features were unmarred by her leap from her Hampshire House home.”²³

Commissioning Memory

Two weeks after Hale’s death, Frida Kahlo opened her exhibition at the Julian Levy gallery. Clare Boothe Luce was in attendance on opening night. In an interview with her biographer, Sylvia Jukes Morris, Boothe claimed Kahlo raised the subject of a memorial to Hale, saying “I would like to paint a *recuerdo* of her. Her life must not be forgotten.”²⁴ However, in her interview with Kahlo’s biographer Hayden Herrera, Boothe herself is the instigator of the memorial: “Suddenly it came to me that a portrait of Dorothy by a famous painter friend might be something her poor mother might like to have.”²⁵

²² The American sculptor and landscape architect Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988) is a recurring figure in this story, being independently linked to Hale, Boothe, and Kahlo. As well as being Hale’s former boyfriend, he also had a brief affair with Kahlo (Herrera, *Frida Kahlo*, 200). Noguchi had been commissioned to craft a white marble bust of Boothe in 1933. Strands of modernist history came together in 1934 when Noguchi, Boothe, and Hale rode in Buckminster Fuller’s Dymaxion car to the opening night of Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson’s opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* in Hartford, Connecticut; see Steven Watson, *Prepare for Saints: Gertrude Stein, Virgil Thomson, and the Mainstreaming of American Modernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 267. Noguchi claimed to have seen Hale the night before she died and that her last words to him were: “Well, that’s the end of the vodka. There isn’t any more” (Herrera, *Frida Kahlo*, 290).

²³ “Mrs Hale Died.”

²⁴ Sylvia Jukes Morris, *Rage for Fame: The Ascent of Clare Boothe Luce* (New York: Random House, 1997), 330.

²⁵ Herrera, *Frida Kahlo*, 292.

Kahlo worked through the first half of 1939 on the portrait and had it delivered to Boothe's home in the summer of that year. Decades later, Boothe told Herrera of her response to the delivery: "I will always remember the shock I had when I pulled the painting out of the crate. I felt really physically *sick*. What was I going to do with this gruesome painting of the smashed corpse of my friend, and her blood dripping down all over the frame?"²⁶ Boothe was so incensed, Herrera records, that she telephoned one of Hale's admirers, most likely Isamu Noguchi, and threatened "to destroy the painting with a pair of library scissors."²⁷ She appears to have been particularly angered by the inscription identifying her as the instigator of the work. Sylvia Jukes Morris quotes a letter Boothe wrote to photographer Nikolas Muray of her intention to ask Noguchi to "paint out the legend—that is to say the actual name of the unfortunate girl and my name." Boothe closed her letter to Muray with an entreaty: "May I please ask you...not to speak of the incident to anyone."²⁸ Morris also quotes from the diary of Boothe's daughter Ann Brokaw. In her entry of September 12 1939, Brokaw notes Noguchi visited their apartment. He "covered the place with Ma's name and Dorothy Hale's name on it in the corner of the picture of Mrs Hale—a suicide which Mother nearly destroyed because it is so gruesome."²⁹

Noguchi later denied making any alteration to Kahlo's work and Dorothy Hale's name does indeed remain in the inscription; that of Clare Boothe Luce, however, has been prominently excised. Boothe's response to Kahlo's painting is illuminated when analysed in terms of concepts of "guilt" and "shame." Elspeth Probyn suggests guilt "is triggered in response to specific acts and can be smoothed away by an act of reparation."³⁰ Boothe felt guilty for presuming Hale had spent the money she had gifted her on a dress, and thus refusing the other woman's invitation to her party. She told Hayden Herrera that when she met Kahlo at the exhibition opening, "my conscience was still bothering me because I had been accusing Dorothy falsely—in my thoughts—of taking advantage of

²⁶ Herrera, *Frida Kahlo*, 292.

²⁷ Herrera, *Frida Kahlo*, 293.

²⁸ Morris, *Rage for Fame*, 237.

²⁹ Morris, *Rage for Fame*, 237.

³⁰ Elspeth Probyn, *Blush: Faces of Shame* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 45.

me.”³¹ Commissioning a memorial portrait to Hale was a reparative act in response to this guilt, an act enabled by Boothe’s economic power: “I asked the price [of a painting], Kahlo told me, and I said, ‘Go ahead. Send the portrait to me when it is finished. I will then send it on to Dorothy’s mother.’”³² As the conduit for her daughter’s memorial portrait—she has not only paid for it, but *sent it on*—Boothe will attract the good thoughts and feelings of Mrs Donovan. Yet her financial largesse backfires when Kahlo literally makes Boothe—her very *name*—a part of the memorial.

Probyn suggests that, “[w]hile both guilt and shame are excited by what others think of us, shame goes further. Shame is deeply related not only to how others think of us but also to how we think about ourselves.”³³ By forcing a confrontation with the self, with her role in Hale’s death, and with the prospect of being *forever linked* to Hale and her demise, Kahlo’s portrait stirred Boothe’s shame. Probyn notes most “experiences of shame make you want to disappear, to hide away and to cover yourself.”³⁴ Boothe acted out this impulse by working to remove her name, her surrogate self, from the painting. She also sought to make the physical object disappear, asking a friend, Frank Crowninshield, to keep the work in hiding. Upon his death it was returned to Boothe, who donated it to the Phoenix Art Museum with, in her words, the “express understanding that it would be listed as the gift of an *anonymous donor*.”³⁵ In the early 1970s, the work was included in an exhibition of Mexican art and, Boothe related to Herrera, a curator investigating the painting’s provenance and unaware of the condition of anonymity, uncovered her connection with it. Thus Boothe’s relationship with the work, suppressed for so many years, was made public.

It is initially difficult to understand how Boothe could be surprised at Kahlo’s offering, as she had attended the opening at the Levy Gallery, which included some of the artist’s most graphic and confronting paintings, including *Mi Nacimiento (My Birth)* (1932) and *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932). The latter

³¹ Herrera, *Frida Kahlo*, 292.

³² Herrera, *Frida Kahlo*, 292.

³³ Probyn, *Blush*, 45.

³⁴ Probyn, *Blush*, 39.

³⁵ Herrera, *Frida Kahlo*, 478, n. 290, emphasis in original.

conveys Kahlo's experience of miscarriage through images of her naked and bleeding body, a floating foetus, and cross-sections of the female reproductive organs. In her interview with Herrera, Boothe states that when Kahlo suggested she paint a *recuerdo* of Hale, she presumed "it meant a portrait done from memory. I thought Kahlo would paint a portrait of Dorothy in the style of her own *Self-Portrait*, which I bought in Mexico."³⁶ The painting Boothe refers to here is Kahlo's *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Leon Trotsky* (1937). It depicts the artist posing demurely, elegantly dressed and with flowers in her plaited hair. The figure is framed by sumptuous curtains and holds a bouquet of flowers. The initial impression is of beauty, order and serenity. Perhaps Boothe expected Kahlo to produce a similar image of Hale as a woman at peace in life, an image that memorialised her celebrated beauty and froze it in time. Kahlo *did* memorialise Hale's beauty, however the medium through which she did this was not Hale's living body, but her corpse.

Boothe's response to the painting can be interpreted as an understandable reaction to an image that seemed a gory and unfeeling tribute to a dead friend. Perhaps, however, the violent force of her response is suggestive of something more. Three of the key features of Kahlo's painting—Hampshire House, Hale's "Madame X" dress, and the corsage—emphasise the subject's status as "kept" woman—that she was reliant on her sexual attractiveness to maintain her lifestyle. Repeated references to the use of a dress as a tool through which to secure financial security position Hale as a kind of modern-day courtesan. According to Stephen Gundle, the latter exercised "a power in the field of consumption that was reflected first of all in their wardrobes."³⁷ The vision of Hale's corpse on the ground may enhance this connection, with Sarah Webster Goodwin reminding us of the link between the corpse and the prostitute in the Western imaginary, and of the prostitute as the victim of modernity.³⁸ Furthermore, Kahlo's painting recalls the plethora of nineteenth-century images of suicidal or dead women, many of them driven to self-harm following sexual

³⁶ Herrera, *Frida Kahlo*, 292.

³⁷ Stephen Gundle, *Glamour: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 83.

³⁸ Sarah Webster Goodwin, "Romanticism and the Ghost of Prostitution: Freud, *Maria*, and 'Alice Fell,'" in *Death and Representation*, ed. Sarah Webster Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 152-73 (158).

transgression.³⁹ Some nineteenth-century representations of the suicidal “fallen woman” showed her literally falling from a height. Indeed the “*falling woman*” was one of the most enduring and oft-repeated themes in the portrayal of women’s suicide.⁴⁰

So we can say that, in a number of ways, Kahlo’s painting acknowledges Hale’s liminal status in the New York social scene, and that this factor of the work contributed to the force of Boothe’s response. The latter’s biographer suggests Boothe viewed Hale as a kind of alter ego and took “a vicarious thrill in observing a life that well might have been her own had she not made such fortunate marriages.”⁴¹ Boothe herself interpreted and responded to Hale in terms of the latter’s sexual currency: it was she who suggested the actress wear the “Madame X” dress to the party the night before her death. Probyn describes shame as “the most intimate of feelings; it makes our selves intimate to our selves,” and it was perhaps the discomfiting revelation of self, of the correspondences between herself and Hale, that Boothe encountered here.⁴²

In her interview with Herrera, Boothe gives herself a central place in Dorothy’s story. It is almost as if, her relationship with Kahlo’s painting now being public knowledge, she will own the connection with a vengeance. Contrary to newspaper reports that stated Hale had left several notes, including one to her sister, Boothe claims “the only message she had left in the apartment was a note addressed to me...She thanked me for her friendship and asked me to see that her mother...was notified.”⁴³ Boothe casts herself as “best friend” and most trusted intimate, charged with the sensitive duty of informing Hale’s mother of her daughter’s death.⁴⁴ In this interview, which has become an important source

³⁹ Examples include George Cruikshank, Plate VIII, *The Drunkard’s Children*, 1848; George Frederic Watts, *Found Drowned*, 1867; and Abraham Solomon, *Drowned! Drowned!*, 1860. On the “fallen woman” in the nineteenth-century visual arts, see Ron M. Brown, *The Art of Suicide* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 146-61.

⁴⁰ Brown, *Art of Suicide*, 157, emphasis added.

⁴¹ Morris, *Rage for Fame*, 237.

⁴² Probyn, *Blush*, 41.

⁴³ Herrera, *Frida Kahlo*, 292.

⁴⁴ Myra Bairstow forcefully disputes Boothe’s version of events here. Bairstow claims Hale’s mother had in fact died when her daughter was sixteen (see *Official Dorothy Hale*

for readings of Hale's life and Kahlo's work, Boothe controls the narrative. She frames Hale in terms that were very different to how she herself was seen. Boothe lauds Hale's beauty but ultimately casts her as weak and pathetic: "We all believed that a girl of such extraordinary beauty and charm could not be long in either developing a career or finding another husband. Unhappily, Dorothy had very little talent and no luck."⁴⁵ Boothe reiterates Hale's dependence on men, making reference to the latter's "many ardent admirers," including artist Constantin Alajalov and Noguchi. She claims it was one of these two men she contacted upon receiving Kahlo's painting, but cannot recall which one. The identity of this man is unimportant beyond his status as admirer of Dorothy Hale. Boothe told "whichever one arrived" of her plan "to destroy the painting with a pair of library scissors."⁴⁶ The detail of the "library scissors" here is interesting—the scissors act as an extension of Boothe's body and the fact that they are *library* scissors aligns her, even as she confesses to a proposed act of violence, with the markers of civilization. They also remind us of Boothe's status as public intellectual as opposed to Hale's as failed actress and wannabe socialite.

Kahlo's Dorothy Hale

Kahlo's painting, and the story surrounding it, are rich subjects for analysis and could be interpreted through a variety of frameworks. Kahlo has been seen as a strongly symbolic artist whose work reflected her physical and emotional states. *The Suicide of Dorothy Hale* can obviously be read as much of a commentary on Kahlo's emotional state as of Hale's, not least because it was executed during a period of personal turmoil which included the artist's separation from her husband Diego Rivera. Scholars such as Sarah Misemer suggest the painting "projects [Kahlo's] own contemplation of suicide onto her friend's

blog entry for April 23, 2012). Interestingly, Bairstow suggests that it was the bond between Hale and Boothe, as evidenced by the commissioning of a memorial portrait, that initially sparked her interest in the story: "I was moved by the thoughtful gesture of Mrs Luce and I admired her sensitivity." As a result, "I was drawn to the painting and wanted to know more about Dorothy Hale and her friendship with Clare Luce and Frida Kahlo."

⁴⁵ Herrera, *Frida Kahlo*, 291.

⁴⁶ Herrera, *Frida Kahlo*, 293.

experience.”⁴⁷ However in this paper, I am less interested in the painting as a key to Kahlo than *as a representation of Dorothy Hale*, and specifically of Dorothy Hale as a woman endeavouring to forge a personal and professional identity in the New York of the 1930s.

Lucy Fischer has noted the recurrent use of the fall from a skyscraper as means of suicide for women in films of the 1930s. She suggests that in these films “modern architecture and design conspire to erase or expel the female element from the metropolitan scene,” a cinematic trend that “did not bode well for the modern urban woman.”⁴⁸ Along with the painting’s inscription, the iconicity of Hampshire House locates Hale in a specific place. In common with the cinematic females of Fischer’s analysis, Hale is “expelled” from this locale, removed—literally—from her home. Hampshire House is a masculine presence in Kahlo’s painting, as both an imposing phallic symbol and a monument to capitalist values. Fischer notes that “in the cinema of the 1930s [...] the *moderne* high-rise is often an insistent masculine space, which females traverse at their peril.”⁴⁹ We can read Kahlo’s vision of Hale’s experience with Hampshire House in similar terms. As Oriana Baddeley reads the work, Kahlo’s Hale “falls from the fantasy world she has inhabited to the harsh bloodspattered reality of the street, [...] a human sacrifice to an alienated and consumerist culture.”⁵⁰

As noted previously, a press report described Hale’s facial features as “unmarred” despite the violent nature of her death. Hale’s facial features also remain “unmarred” in Kahlo’s painting. As a celebrated “beauty,” Hale’s face was her cultural capital and claim to social significance. In his interview with Kahlo’s biographer, Isamu Noguchi posited the potential “loss” of this asset as a key to Hale’s actions: “Dorothy was very pretty, and she traveled in this false world. She didn’t want to be second to anybody, and she must have thought she

⁴⁷ Sarah M. Misemer, *Secular Saints: Performing Frida Kahlo, Carlos Gardel, Eva Péron, and Selena* (Woodbridge, UK: Tamesis, 2008), 27, n. 4.

⁴⁸ Lucy Fischer, “City of Women: Busby Berkeley, Architecture, and Urban Space,” *Cinema Journal* 49.4 (2010): 111-130 (130).

⁴⁹ Fischer, “City of Women,” 130.

⁵⁰ Baddeley, “Her Dress Hangs Here,” 14.

was slipping.”⁵¹ In Kahlo’s painting, Hale’s body—in flight and at rest on the ground—is graceful, composed, her skin unblemished, her eyes clear, her hair unruffled. And whilst newspapers used words such as “crashed” and “hurtled” to describe Hale’s fall, Kahlo’s depiction endows it with a sense of grace that is absent from these descriptions. Yet the consequences of the woman’s choice are also starkly revealed. Whilst the body remains intact and her features unmarred, bodily trauma is indicated by the blood trickling from beneath her head and pooled around her body. Furthermore, the blood is not contained within the scene but seeps into the frame, staining it red. Contrasted with the graceful pose and exquisitely moulded facial features of the corpse, this effect enhances the horror of the scene. The stained frame also draws attention to the act of representation and the fact that it is Hale’s grisly demise that renders her the subject of our attention.

In Kahlo’s painting, Hale’s body rests not on a New York sidewalk, but on a flat brown surface. For Hayden Herrera, this “anonymous space is simply a stage, unconnected in terms of scale or perspective with the skyscraper looming behind it.”⁵² Reading the space as stage gives Hale the appearance of a mannequin or marionette, her body manipulated and composed by some external force. Kahlo does the manipulating, but in doing so perhaps comments on the ways in which Hale’s body was manipulated in life. We can also read the flat brown surface as the earth or ground. The return to nature is a recurring theme in Kahlo’s work—bodies are entwined with trees or flowers, man-made landscapes are overtaken by vegetation. In *Raices (Roots)* (1943), for example, “Kahlo’s body merges with nature in an intimate way as her trunk and legs are converted into plant-like roots that begin to grow into the ground.” As such, “Kahlo uses the feminine figure to suggest a potentially powerful life force that emanates from women.”⁵³ Reading the surface as ground, Kahlo gives the body to the earth/the earth to the body, releasing Hale from the material world and laying her to rest.

⁵¹ Herrera, *Frida Kahlo*, 230.

⁵² Herrera, *Frida Kahlo*, 293.

⁵³ Misemer, *Secular Saints*, 34.

Flight

Kahlo's painting shows Hale's body falling or perhaps in "flight." Ron Brown notes nineteenth-century images of "flying and falling women were frightening and clearly disturbed the viewing public," in contrast to the more conventional and poignant paintings of drowned women, which had a "salacious aspect."⁵⁴ The body of the drowned woman is passive, still, non-threatening; that of the flying/falling woman is active, a body making a choice. Barbara Gates also comments on the sense of power conveyed through such images: "These women are not deadened or will-less. Their soaring is—for a moment—an act of autonomy or self-assertion."⁵⁵

This sense of grace is shared with a more recent vision of impending death—Richard Drew's photograph *Falling Man*. Kahlo's painting recalls the imagery of 9/11 in several ways—both depicting totems to modernism as vehicles for destruction; the clouds that float over Hampshire House becoming the smoke that billows from the twin towers.⁵⁶ Drew's photograph of a man falling to his death from the North Tower of the World Trade Center was syndicated widely on September 12, 2001 and then suppressed. As Tom Junod writes in his *Esquire Magazine* article on the Falling Man: "In the most photographed and videotaped day in the history of the world, the images of people jumping were the only images that became, by consensus, taboo—the only images from which Americans were proud to avert their eyes."⁵⁷ Sarah Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen remind us that in "classical dramaturgy, death must occur offstage: the

⁵⁴ Brown, *Art of Suicide*, 157.

⁵⁵ Barbara Gates, *Victorian Suicide: Mad Crimes and Sad Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 142.

⁵⁶ The twin towers were designed by architect Minoru Yamasaki in 1965 and opened in 1973. Yamasaki also designed the Pruitt-Igoe housing complex in St Louis, Missouri in the mid 1950s. The housing project was unsuccessful and fell into disrepair, and was eventually demolished in 1972. Photographs of the project imploding bear a striking resemblance to both the destruction of the twin towers and Kahlo's vision of Hampshire House; see Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 160.

⁵⁷ Tom Junod, "The Falling Man," *Esquire*, September 8, 2003, http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ0903-SEP_FALLINGMAN.

corpse is pointedly not to be represented.”⁵⁸ Kahlo’s transgression of this convention is amplified because she does not just show us a dead body, but a body with an identity. She shows us the dead body of *Dorothy Hale*. Similarly, it is the possibility of a viewer attaching an identity to the Falling Man that contributes to the discomfort generated by Drew’s photograph.⁵⁹

Goodwin and Bronfen describe the decaying body as a force that is “unstable, liminal, disturbing.” In order to counteract this, “mourning rituals and representations of death may seek strategies to stabilize the body,” thus “transforming it into a monument, an enduring stone.”⁶⁰ Boothe’s desire for an “over the fireside” portrait of Hale is a typical example of this manoeuvre. Yet Kahlo’s representation of the body in flight resists the petrifying strategy—Hale’s action, her choice, is forever unfolding. Kahlo returns Hale to the realm of signification by presenting her suicide as performance event. As a result this picture, like that of the Falling Man, seems divorced from embodied experience, producing an image that could be described as curiously “unfeeling.” And yet perhaps it is the very “unfeelingness” of the image that provokes and uncovers the hidden feelings—such as Boothe’s shame—that circulate around the event.

Monash University

⁵⁸ Sarah Webster Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen, “Introduction,” in *Death and Representation*, ed. Goodwin and Bronfen, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 3-28 (7).

⁵⁹ For contemporary viewers, Kahlo’s painting also recalls the title sequence of AMC’s television series *Mad Men* (2007-present), which shows a businessman falling through a backdrop of skyscrapers and advertising material. The image is generally interpreted as a reference to the series’ ongoing theme of individual dislocation in a rapidly changing urban environment, yet also suggests the “fall” of central character Don Draper. The potency of the *Falling Man* image was revealed in the discussion generated by the advertising poster for Season 5 of *Mad Men*. The poster showed a man in a suit falling from a height against a stark white backdrop, an image that seemed to directly recall Drew’s photograph. On the significance of the Falling Man imagery to an understanding of *Mad Men*, see Tom Junod, “Falling (Mad) Man,” *Esquire*, January 30, 2012, <http://www.esquire.com/the-side/feature/falling-mad-man-6648672>, and Monique Rooney, “Turned Back: *Mad Men* as Intermedial Melodrama,” *Cultural Studies Review* 18.2 (2012): 169-87.

⁶⁰ Goodwin and Bronfen, *Death and Representation*, 14.