

Curator's Statement

Mary Lincoln & Frida Kahlo UNFRAMED brings together two extraordinary women—separated by time, culture, and geography—whose lives were shaped by the struggle to define themselves within worlds determined to confine them. Through watercolor and selected oil paintings, John Ransom Phillips offers a contemplative encounter with both women as they move through their own becoming. He presents them “unframed”—released from the historical narratives, diagnoses, and caricatures that once tried to contain them. This exhibition opens alongside Phillips’ reimagined stage work, *Mrs. President*, at Charing Cross Theatre, extending Mary Lincoln’s presence across visual art and performance.

Mary Lincoln (1818–1882) and Frida Kahlo (1907–1954) share striking psychological and symbolic parallels. Both lived with intense emotion, chronic pain, and love interwoven with suffering. Yet their responses diverged: Mary drew inward, overwhelmed by loss and isolation, while Frida pushed outward, transforming her pain into vibrant art and a distinct identity. Frida Kahlo became globally renowned artist for making her interior world visible. Mary Lincoln, however, was rarely granted such self-authorship; her public image hardened into myth and misinterpretation. Phillips noted this notion instinctively when conceiving this body of work. His decades-long practice of creating “psychological and symbolic representations” of historical figures abandons literal accuracy in favor of imaginative access to inner realities, aligning him with Symbolism and artistic traditions that seek truths beyond documentation.

Phillips’ choice to work primarily in watercolor is central to the exhibition’s emotional force. Although watercolor has often been considered delicate or secondary within traditional hierarchies, he handles it with the structural weight of oil painting. His watercolors are built through carefully layered, saturated pigment—surfaces that feel anchored and deliberate. At the same time, watercolor’s natural transparency and unpredictability remain essential: boundaries soften, forms blur, and color moves with a freedom that echoes the uncertain terrain of memory and emotion. This interplay between solidity and fluidity mirrors the psychological landscapes of Mary and Frida, capturing how identity can be both fragile and powerful, shaped by intention yet vulnerable to forces beyond one’s control.

The exhibition unfolds through the metaphor of framing and unframing. It begins with a prologue in which Mary and Frida are imagined in symbolic kinship—a meeting across time. From there, the works trace how each woman was defined by the expectations of others, how pain disrupted those imposed frames, how imagination helped reconfigure experience, and how each reclaimed aspects of her own agency. The final movement toward “unframing” is not triumphal release but an honest recognition of transformation—death, dissolution, and the loosening of all constraints.

Phillips' watercolors do not illustrate biography. They create psychological spaces where history becomes myth, where private pain becomes shared recognition, and where the personal becomes political. They invite viewers into this space with a series of quiet but urgent questions: How are we framed? What structures shape our sense of self? And what might it mean to become unframed?

These and other questions are especially resonant in a time when women's bodies, minds, and experiences remain subject to public debate. How do we frame mental health? Who decides when emotional intensity becomes pathology? How do trauma, creativity, and identity intersect? These concerns are not relics. The systems that once constrained Mary and Frida—medical, cultural, and social—continue to influence how women's experiences are understood. Their stories matter because they echo in contemporary conversations about autonomy, embodiment, and the right to self-definition.

This exhibition traces a path through constraint, rupture, imagination, and reclamation. It is not linear; it moves through pain that refuses silence, through dreams that sustain, and through unexpected parallels between two women who never met yet illuminate one another. It ends not with resolution but with agency—the insistence on the right to shape one's own story. In UNFRAMED, Phillips invites us to retell these narratives, to question the inherited frames that have confined Mary and Frida, and to imagine alternatives. Doing so opens the way for a more expansive, empathetic future—one in which identity is not fixed but continually reimagined and reclaimed.

Welcome to Mary Lincoln & Frida Kahlo UNFRAMED—a space where boundaries soften, histories shift, and two women speak in their own terms.