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There Was Blood: Cuban-American Artist Ana Mendieta's Super-8 Fecundity



Mendieta as Butterfly, 1975

In the 1960s and '70s, a hardy cadre of artists left such easily commodified mediums as painting and sculpture behind to explore the desert frontiers of land art and the inner ecstasies of performance art. Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) played hide-and-seek amid the shifting levels of the Great Salt Lake while Carolee Schneemann unfurled a feminist manifesto from her vagina (*Interior Scroll*, 1975), each setting standards in their genres. Ana Mendieta's work spanned both of these seminal movements, even as she brought various other postwar aesthetics into astonishingly resonant short films. Of the fifteen in the Lelong exhibition, nine have not been seen before.

Mendieta (1948–1985) was born into a well-to-do family in Havana. Her parents had been supporters of Fidel Castro but soon became disillusioned with the revolution and sent Ana, then twelve, and her fourteen-year-old sister to a Catholic orphanage in Dubuque, Iowa. After the extended separation from her parents — Mendieta wouldn't see her father, who was jailed for counterrevolutionary activities in 1961, for eighteen years — and an adolescence that included white students in her Iowa high school calling her "nigger" and "whore," it is not surprising that the budding artist gazed inward. In a note published after her death, she wrote, "I was looked at by the people in the Midwest as an erotic being (myth of the hot Latin), and sort of evil. This created a very rebellious attitude in me until it sort of exploded inside me and I became aware of my own being." One who possessed, as it turned out, a fearless independence. Shortly after receiving an M.A. in painting, in 1972, she quit that medium, later explaining that "my paintings were not real enough for what I wanted the image to convey — and by real I mean I wanted my images to have power, to be magic."

It doesn't get more real than *X-ray* (1975), the only film with sound in the gallery. Viewers can hear a technician clicking switches on a cinefluorography machine, which makes X-ray motion pictures. The bones of Mendieta's jaws move as her skull is filmed from different angles and she repeats simple syllables — "eee peep aah pap ahh pop ooo poop ah mom." Set within a glowing circle of white light, the not-quite-transparent skin, lips, tongue, and

muscle form ethereal gray nimbi around the more sharply defined vertebrae and other bones.



Ana Mendieta, *Sweating blood*, 1973. Still from super-8mm film transferred to high-definition digital media, color, silent.

In *Sweating Blood* (1973), Mendieta — eyes closed, dark hair pulled behind her ears — faces the camera close up as blood (dripped by an assistant from an offscreen syringe) seems to well out of her scalp and bead upon her forehead. After several minutes, two glistening rivulets run down, one curling alongside her nose, the other tracing the smooth jut of her left cheekbone.

It was with blood that Mendieta sought magic, a reflection of her Catholic upbringing as well as of the Santería religion practiced by some Cubans. She once told an interviewer, "We had a little chapel in our house and I used to play priest all the time." She would tie a half-

slip around her neck and ring bells, the signal to the faithful during the Mass that the bread and wine have been literally transformed into the body and blood of Christ. Mendieta strived to combine such perfervid divinity with Mother Earth, famously using fire and gunpowder to etch the shape of her body into the ground. Constantly seeking to reunite our attenuated natures with our primal roots, she once staged a performance in which she held a freshly decapitated chicken while the gushing blood splattered her naked body. "It was during my childhood in Cuba that I first became fascinated by primitive art and cultures," she wrote for a book project. "It seems as if these cultures are provided with an inner knowledge, a closeness to natural resources."

A sense of this magic is kindled in *Energy Charge* (1975), which opens with barren trees against a whited-out horizon. A silhouetted figure walks diagonally into the black-and-white frame before disappearing against the dark ground; moments later, surrounding branches flare bright red and a scarlet figure appears against the central tree trunk, arms uplifted — maybe crucified, maybe joyous, undoubtedly passionate. The figure is flat, defined only by a dark fleck at the mons, as if menstrual blood were rising like sap to rejuvenate the stark landscape.

That same year Mendieta used early video effects to fashion the fecund imagery of *Butterfly*, in which she stands naked, her form fading in and out of a background where shifting colors move in waves, the only constant forms the arc of her hair and her pubic triangle. Elusive shapes flicker around her before coalescing into broad, quivering wings. Mendieta used a sixteen-channel video processor to assign arbitrary color to various levels of brightness and then filmed the playback monitor with a Super-8 camera, the differing frame rates adding pulsating radiance to this vision of electronic metamorphosis.

In *Weather Balloon*, *Feathered Balloon* (1974) Mendieta dispenses with human presence, creating an airborne ritual, part Santería, part skeet shooting. A bright balloon drifts against blue sky and then bursts (one of Mendieta's colleagues hit it with a shotgun blast); large white feathers wheel and drift, settling across a field of brown grass. The camera wanders



X-RAY, c. 1975. Still from 16mm film transferred to digital media, black and white, silent.

the perimeter of this fluttering carnage, a debris field that could represent fallen fowl or crashed angel. But, as in the Rapture, the body itself is missing.

This video plays in a small side gallery that also contains a vitrine of film canisters, sketches, and other studio paraphernalia, a reliquary for a vibrant life cut violently short. (The cause of Mendieta's death remains unresolved. Her husband, minimalist sculptor Carl Andre, was acquitted of her murder, leaving the improbable possibility of an accidental fall — or an even more doubtful suicide leap — from their Mercer Street high-rise as her perpetually troubling exit from earthly existence.)

Schneemann asked, in 1963, "Could a nude woman artist be both image and image maker?" Mendieta ran with this idea, as contemptuous of the male gaze as she had been of the medium it had long defined: painting. Instead she subsumed Warhol's screen tests, Rauschenberg's X-ray self-portraits, earth art, visceral performance, and immemorial impulses into a sui generis corpus that remains as fresh today as her forever young face.