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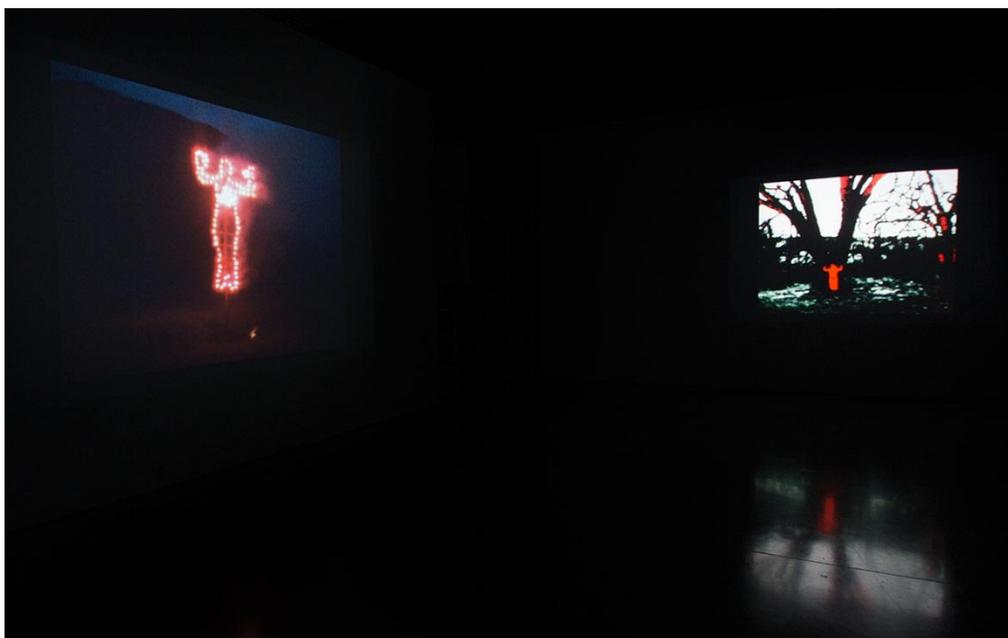
## Hyperallergic

### Museums

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by Sheila Dickinson

## Ana Mendieta Comes Alive in Her Films



Installation view, 'Covered in Time and History: The Films of Ana Mendieta' at the Katherine E. Nash Gallery (all images courtesy Katherine E. Nash Gallery)

MINNEAPOLIS — The more time I spent in the galleries of *Covered in Time and History: The Films of Ana Mendieta*, the more I felt the lived presence of the artist herself. Unlike the bright white cube of a typical gallery, here the viewer is invited to walk through a filmy white curtain and enter a darkened, sanctified space. The artist appears only occasionally in her films, but she haunts them with her body forms found in earth, fire, blood, and water. Projected directly onto the walls of the gallery, up to three per wall, the films interact and converse with each other as they begin and end asynchronously. A hushed silence permeates the darkness as Mendieta, or her body form, shape shifts upon the walls. The films are an activating presence, bring to the viewer an aliveness that cannot be found in her still photography. Much of that photography, and her films, have until now been understood as documentation; this exhibition demonstrates that Mendieta thought and created through films as much as through the performances and sculptures shown in them.

One of the first films to greet the viewer in the Katherine E. Nash Gallery is "Burial Pyramid" (1974), in whose opening frame Mendieta lies buried, except for her head, under a mound of large grey rocks. Slowly the rocks begin to rise and fall as she breathes. She breathes deeper and deeper, and the rocks become unstable and begin to roll off her until she is mostly uncovered — breathing normally by the end of the film, free from the rocky burden, resting in her earthen bed. Like a miracle, she appears to be literally resuscitated due to her own creative energy and productive spirit, which this exhibition is determined to honor.



Ana Mendieta, "Sweating Blood" (1973), Super 8 film, color, silent  
(© The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC, courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York)

Mendieta's untimely and tragic death can make the show feel like either a memorial or a revival. Her films encompass ritualized actions, as she sought to connect with pagan/pre-Christian rituals performed in the land; the magic and power of those recorded rituals make her resuscitation, certainly in spirit, entirely plausible. Mendieta should be alive today and working as an established artist, and that, I believe, is at the heart of this show. Quotes from

her appear directly on the walls, rather than didactic curatorial texts. Her voice is heard from a small conjoined space, where the

artist's niece Raquel Mendieta has illustrated a 1981 lecture she gave. The curatorial decision to isolate and focus on Mendieta's movements, her role behind the camera, and her voice gives the artist posthumous time to be present with the viewer (and the viewer with her).

Three of the films here have never been exhibited before. One of these is projected onto the wall opposite "Burial Pyramid," and next to two other films that employ the element of fire. All appear significant in her oeuvre already, especially a 1979 film from the *Siluetas* series she made in Iowa, showing a body-shaped mound of hay with a trench cut through it. The gap is filled with long tendrils of a firework material that, once lit, slither and coil, coming alive and evoking bodily entrails. As with her works involving water, Mendieta's pieces with fire are so important to see as moving images, rather than as still photographs. Whereas photos record a before and after, finite moments showing discreet transformation, the films are slow, unfolding in real time, focusing entirely on the process of the transformation as it happens. It's mesmerizing. These films propel Mendieta into the future, because film "is unstoppable real time, reeled over and over, as if caught in an endless quest forward," writes Laura Wertheim Joseph in the catalogue.



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Super 8 was an inexpensive and portable new technology that allowed Mendieta to shoot outside, independently, and provided an intimacy that's evoked well in this darkened gallery environment. Motivated in part by this exhibition, the estate of Ana Mendieta, and in particular her niece Raquel, have meticulously restored every one of her Super 8 films using a technology called 2K, which is so cutting edge that they were required to downgrade the transferred films to Blu-ray for this show. 2K technology scans frame by frame, maintaining aesthetic integrity. The viewer now is privileged to see Mendieta's work as close to its original form as possible, rather than from grainy, overplayed Super 8 reels.



Ana Mendieta, "Esculturas Rupestres" (Rupestrian Sculptures, 1981), Super 8 film, black and white, silent (© The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC, courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York)

Naturally, this also brings up some art historical questions. Will seeing so many of her films showcased as the center of her practice change how Mendieta is taught in art history and her subsequent influence? Why was this exciting moving-image work buried for so long? Did Western culture need to see her in a more passive frame for her work to be initially accepted by the art establishment? Was this due to her Cuban roots and because her video work is so productive and challenging, her land work so much more experimental than that of her male peers?

Many of the films are part of her *Siluetas* series, in which a female form is molded, carved, dug, or lit aflame in the earth — a

symbol of her own body. Mendieta herself mostly does not appear, because she is making the films, showing us what she sees, what she wants us to see. There are only a few works where we catch sight of her, the most unusual and compelling of which is "Mirage" (1974).

In this film, a mirror in a wooden frame rests against a tree in a wooded area. The camera, out of view behind Mendieta, catches her reflection, showing her with a large, womb-like belly. Mendieta takes a knife and pierces this bodily protrusion, ripping a gash, then reaching her hands inside to pull out a white, feather-like substance, until only an empty cavern is left. She bows her head, and the camera turns off.



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This film anchors a side in one of the two galleries dedicated to her works with and about blood, violence, and the body. These two rooms are tucked at the back of the exhibition, where the drama and intensity of her earliest film works evoke her intense, youthful, and completely reasonable outrage about a campus rape and murder that occurred while she was a student at the University of Iowa. Those brave films segue into a room featuring her silent and serene carvings into white cliffs in Cuba and Iowa in 1981, toward the end of her career, showing more mature and contemplative static works in stone. The viewer is then bathed in the waves of her water-based *Siluetas*, the liquid rippling through the body form, cleansing and purifying it. As Mendieta experiments with the elements — the ebb and flow of life and its cycles of birth, death, and rebirth — she asks the viewer to suspend disbelief in the spiritual realm in order to leave the shackles of the material world behind. We convene with her presence in this space for this time.



Ana Mendieta, "Creek" (1974), Super 8 film, color, silent (© The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC, courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York)