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Ana Mendieta: blurring boundaries of the self

A new Hayward Gallery show should inscribe the artist as a true original



Untitled (Facial Hair Transplant) (1972)

For decades, nothing became the life of Ana Mendieta like her leaving of it. She died in 1985 falling out of the window of the Manhattan apartment she shared with her husband, the minimalist artist [Carl Andre](#). Lack of evidence saw Andre acquitted of her murder yet the scandal rumbled on.

Less sustained was Mendieta's reputation as an artist. The combination of her Cuban origins allied to her interest in violence, magic and death, and her practice of making art out of her own body and nature, saw her dismissed by the western establishment as a tragic, exotic earth mother. Meanwhile she was condemned by certain feminists, among whose number she resided, for boiling the female experience down to bodily essentials.

Only in 2004, when Whitney Museum of American Art in New York gave her a retrospective, did Mendieta begin to come in from the cold. Now the Hayward Gallery in London has served up an exhibition that should inscribe her as one of the most original artists of her generation. Its chronological rigour and thorough excavation of archival material – both on

display and within an excellent catalogue illuminated by the artist's own statements – highlight aspects of her work that have been neglected.

Mendieta was born in Havana, Cuba in 1948. Although her father served in Castro's post-revolutionary government, her family found themselves alienated by the anti-Catholicism of the regime. In 1961 she and her sister Raquel were sent by their parents to Iowa in the US.

Enrolled at university to study painting in 1967, Mendieta found herself in a world where male-dominated, dispassionate conceptualism ruled. "I was doing these images – figures, blood. They thought, 'Hey, what is this crap?'" she recalled. Jettisoning painting because it was "not real", she turned to working with her own body and documenting her performances through photography and film.

The Hayward exhibition opens with three suites of photographs shot in 1972. Showing Mendieta pressing a pane of glass into her naked flesh, assembling herself a moustache from hairs cut from her bearded male companion, playing around with hair and facial features to alter her appearance – they announce her concern with the nature of being in the world. What are the boundaries between self and other? Reality and fantasy? The risks and rewards of pushing the limits between them?

They also flag her formalism. Ensuring that she is shot straight on, with no extraneous detail, Mendieta – who once described her images as "icon-type things" – was from her early days intent on, as she put it, "controlling what you are seeing". In other words, however visceral her message, her attention to artistic process always rescued it from careless self-indulgence.

This is just as well, for the young Mendieta squeezes liquid from her breast, sweats blood from her forehead, clutches a dead chicken (killed on camera) and enacts the corpse of a rape victim. Yet even at its grittiest, the carnage is anchored by the poised, hieratic dignity of that rational viewpoint.

She could be funny too, as witnessed by "Untitled (Blood Sign #2" (1974), a film which shows Mendieta dragging her arms down a white wall leaving two perfect, bloody curves in their wake. Those scary, uncompromising, sanguinous signatures of female presence mischievously mock the misogyny of "Anthropometries", the silhouettes left by naked female models covered in blue paint as they rolled about on the instructions of Yves Klein.

In 1971, Mendieta visited Mexico for the first time. For someone who experienced her Cuban exile as being "cast from the womb", Mexico was a passport to reconnection that she described as "going back to the source". She embarks on literally inscribing herself into the land. In lonely, rustic settings – hillsides, rocks, seashores – she lies down and covers herself with flowers, twigs and stones. She sets fire to a silhouette of her corpse; feathers herself and lies in shallow waves like a washed-up ocean bird; slathers herself in mud and stands, arms in surrender pose, against the bark of tree.

Drawing on pre-historic and ancient art, and popular Mexican rituals such as the Day of the Dead and Santería, which blends Catholic and [Yoruba](#) beliefs, she discovered a "a closeness to natural resources . . . [a] sense of magic, knowledge and power" . . . Such practices provided her, she said, with "a closeness to natural resources . . . [a] sense of magic, knowledge and power".

The results are a meditation on the rapport between humanity and nature and life and death. They are also very clearly the expression of a woman who believed "in one universal energy which runs through everything from insect to man, from man to spectre, from plant to galaxy". Little wonder that she condemned male [land artists such as Robert Smithson](#) for having "brutalised nature" with their invasive monuments.

Over the course of the 1970s Mendieta took the key step of removing her own body from the art. "I don't particularly like performance art. I don't like that kind of immediacy," she told an interviewer. "I like a thing that can be digested."

Her most famous series, *Siluetas* – in which she leaves just the outline of her body on the landscape, in twigs, or gunpowder, or burnt into the earth – emerged from this desire not to be present. As a result, Mendieta has often been interpreted through fashionable post-structuralist discourses as an artist of "absence" and "trace".

Yet this exhibition, despite its title, *Traces*, resists this reading. For the material power of the work, and her insistence on documentation, tells us that Mendieta desired absolutely to be present, but as an artist rather than a romanticised myth of self.

By 1980 she was in Cuba, carving female shapes into limestone cliffs. Rotund, organic, sensual figures, their spare, exultant lines are based on the goddesses worshipped by Cuba's ancient Taino culture. (Mendieta resisted US feminists' attempts to co-opt her as a generic worshipper of the Great Goddess. Her deities, she declared, were specific to their culture and very carefully researched.) They also bring to mind Matisse, whom she studied, and remind us how French modernism dipped into distant aesthetics when it needed to renew itself.

In 1983 she won the Prix de Rome and transferred to the Italian capital for a year. There the experience of being studio-bound saw her start to focus on sculpture. Among the final works here are rough wood columns and tree trunks onto which Mendieta applied gunpowder reliefs that suggest abstract bodies, leaves and branches.

She also turned to drawing. Unusual surfaces – bark paper and leaves that dried to a hard, woody texture – were the perfect recipient for her free yet disciplined graphics in gouache, acrylic, ink and wash. Using a lexicon of slits, spirals, coils and labyrinths to balance rounded silhouettes that recall wombs, embryos and breasts, Mendieta summons images possessed with an archaic, sacred charisma.

Certainly they are maternal, but they are curiously genderless too. Along with the late wood sculptures, they testify to an artist whose feminist concerns are nuanced by her growing awareness of other battles: racism for example, and the runaway capitalism that would provoke her into writing: "Who speaks for the US today? [. . .] The advertising agencies?"

This raw, spartan, archetypal vision testifies that Mendieta was reaching for an art that would evade the commercial, technology-drunk hysteria of late 20th-century America. (She spoke of her work as being "pre-industrial" and "in the tradition of a Neolithic artist".)

Rather than succumbing to essentialism, she was condensing her vocabulary down to bare essentials. Had she been a white man, her gift for taking the particular and making it universal would have seen her hailed a giant. And if he had died young, you can be sure his resurrection wouldn't have taken so long.