

Rediscovering Ana Mendieta

The traveling Mendieta retrospective currently at the Hirshhorn Museum comes nearly 20 years after the artist's death. At the core of the show are photographs and little-seen films documenting her ritualistic, visually searing performances.

BY ELEANOR HEARTNEY

The last New York retrospective exhibition of Ana Mendieta's work opened at the New Museum in 1987, when the controversy over the circumstances surrounding her death two years earlier was still red hot. The show was overshadowed by an air of tragedy and speculation about the role her husband, Carl Andre, may have played in her fatal fall from the window of their 34th-floor Greenwich Village apartment. (After a polarizing trial, Andre was acquitted.) "Ana Mendieta, Earth Body: Sculpture and Performance 1972-1985," organized by the Hirshhorn Museum but premiering at the Whitney Museum last summer, is free of the sensationalism that surrounded the 1987 show. And while the earlier exhibition emphasized her late sculptural work, the new retrospective, curated by Hirshhorn deputy director Olga M. Viso, is far more comprehensive. It brings together little-seen films, numerous photographs from Mendieta's extensive slide archive—some of which were printed in her lifetime and others posthumously—as well as a generous selection of her drawings and three-dimensional output. As a result, it invites a fresh assessment of Mendieta's career.

As Viso points out in her excellent catalogue introduction, criticism of Mendieta has been unusually subject to the shifts of theoretical spin. She has been seen as the ur-feminist, returning her body to mother earth; the Cuban exotic, drawing from a variety of romanticized Caribbean spiritual traditions; and the psychologically damaged exile seeking to heal her divided identity through art. She has by turns been considered an essentialist, an exemplar of postmodern hybridity, a victim of patriarchy, a postcolonialist and a pioneer of post-minimal art strategies. By refusing to settle on any one of these descriptions, the current retrospective survey attempts to present this protean artist in all her complexity. In the process, it also conjures a sense of the remarkable artistic and intellectual ferment of the period in which she emerged.

One of the most striking aspects of Mendieta's work revealed by this exhibition is the unusual degree to which it maintains a dialogue with other art, both of its own time and of the present moment. One keeps making connections back and forward to



Ana Mendieta: Untitled (Silueta Series, Iowa), 1977, color photograph, 13 1/4 by 20 inches. Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collection.

Opposite, detail of Untitled (Silueta Series, Mexico), 1976. Images, unless otherwise noted, are 35mm color slides. Works labeled color or black-and-white photographs were made from the original slides during Mendieta's lifetime. Works, unless otherwise noted, © Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York.

works by artists both older and younger than Mendieta. In fact, it is impossible to talk about her art in isolation. Just as she absorbed the work of contemporaries and near contemporaries like Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, Mary Beth Edelson, Carolee Schneemann and Dennis Oppenheim, Mendieta also has served (as Viso points out) as an inspiration for younger artists such as Janine Antoni, Tania Bruguera and others interested in the radical redefinitions of art explored by artists in the 1970s. Because of her position as intermediary, Mendieta is a figure whose work reopens the possibilities inherent in ideas often dismissed as retrograde, among them the identification of woman with nature, the impact of primitive art and culture on contemporary thinking and a fascination with the sacred. At the same time, her art undermines the romanticism of

such attitudes by resisting any simple identification with such totalizing categories.

Critical understanding of Mendieta's career has undergone a number of shifts over the years. This is particularly evident in the various ways her connections to feminism and body art have been construed. In the '70s, Mendieta was associated for a while with what is now sometimes referred to as feminist essentialism. Her portrayals of the female body merged with nature, her reference to goddess myths, as well as her reenactments of violent rape scenes all fit comfortably within the search for uniquely female expressions and experiences. However, even as these notions began to lose critical favor by the early 1980s, Mendieta had begun to distance herself from such associations, preferring to ground her work instead in a more universal

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legacy of Spanish-colonial Catholicism, Afro-Cuban practices like Santería, Abakuá and Palo Monte, and the nature worship of indigenous Caribbean religions. But she equally refused to be relegated to the realm of the exotic. An astute sense of politics allowed her to maneuver between the various factions of the art world of the '70s and '80s. Among her friends and mentors were older Minimalists Andre and Sol LeWitt (the former her lover and then husband, the latter a close friend), feminists Lucy Lippard, Edelson and Schneeman, experimental

Burden. During Mendieta's years in Iowa, Breder brought Schneemann, Acconci, Nauman, Robert Wilson, Robert Smithson and many other cutting-edge figures to the school as visiting artists.

Even before she transferred to the Intermedia program, Mendieta was gravitating toward the performance mode; her master's thesis project in the painting department was based on a photo-work, included here, *Untitled (Facial Hair Transplants)*, 1972, in which she took mustache and beard hair from a male friend and attached it to her face.



Untitled (Body Tracks), 1974, color photograph, 10 by 8 inches.



Untitled (Maroya) (Moon), 1982, black-and-white photograph, 10 by 8 inches.



Untitled (People Looking at Blood, Moffitt), 1973. Photos this page courtesy the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

spirituality derived from her interest in her pre-Columbian and Afro-Cuban roots.

Her work had little in common with the more iconoclastic versions of feminism which came to the fore in the 1980s, positions that tended to interpret all representations of the female body as constructions of the male gaze. With the '90s came a return to the notion of the body as thing of flesh and blood, with all the messy processes and physical residues that implies. Within this context, Mendieta's performance and installation work has reemerged as an important precursor to present-day concerns.

Mendieta's relationship to the politics of identity is similarly fluid. So-called identity art flirted with essentialism in the early '90s, with the categories of race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation regarded as all-important indicators of an artist's intent. In this context, Mendieta's Cubanness became the prism through which critics viewed her work. More recently, however, fixed notions of identity have given way to an interest in hybridity and multiple identities. Now Mendieta is seen as an exemplar of heterogeneity. As a Cuban-born artist, she embraced her political heritage as well as the mixed spiritual

artists Acconci and Allan Kaprow, Cuban-artist exiles in America and the art community of Castro's Cuba. Each of these groups found some of their own artistic concerns mirrored in her work.

The exhibition opens with a selection of photographs and films documenting Mendieta's work during her years as a graduate student at the University of Iowa. The term "student work" seems a misnomer here, given the clarity and maturity of her production. This is in part a tribute to the exceptional Intermedia program put together for the school by Hans Breder, a German-born artist with ties to the Viennese Actionists, the International Fluxus movement and the New York art scene. (The Iowa program was envisioned as an approach to art that emphasized performance, video and links across mediums and disciplines.) Mendieta met Breder in 1969, while he was just setting up Iowa's Intermedia program and she was still an undergraduate painting major at the university. Breder became her mentor and eventually her lover, and under his influence she discovered the work of Marcel Duchamp, Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni, Robert Morris and Chris

Included here as well are her related *Untitled (Facial Cosmetic Variations)*, also from 1972. This set of color photographs documents her efforts to distort her face by pushing it up against a sheet of glass, compressing her features with a nylon stocking, donning various wigs and applying dark makeup. If the former works bring to mind Adrian Piper's gender-busting, early '70s street performances as the Mythic Being, the latter recall Nauman's 1968 photos *Making Faces*, for which he squeezed and pulled at his face. At the same time, they look ahead to Cindy Sherman's first photographic self-transformations from 1977.

Other early performances documented here involve elements like blood and feathers, which many commentators have linked to Mendieta's childhood exposure in Cuba to the rituals of Santería. A fusion of Catholicism and African religious practices carried by slaves to the Americas, Santería is an animistic religion, based on a principle of universal energy and characterized by such traditional practices as sacred drumming and dance, trance possession and animal sacrifice. But Mendieta's works also relate to the

blood-drenched rituals of Viennese Actionists Hermann Nitsch and Gunter Brus to which Mendieta was introduced by Breder, and to the Chicken-woman performances of Linda Montano.

In *Untitled (Death of a Chicken)*, performed for Breder's Intermedia class in 1972, Mendieta allowed the blood of a freshly decapitated chicken to spurt over her naked body as the bird's headless body flapped reflexively. *Untitled (Blood and Feathers)*, 1974, is documented here on film. Mendieta pours blood over her naked body, rolls in white feathers on a riverbank and stands up, transformed into a bird-woman. This persona returns in the film *Bird Run*, in which she sprints the length of a beach in a similar state. Such works plug into the animism of Santería, while *Sweating Blood*, from 1973, seems to have more to do with the emotional excess of the devotional art of Spanish colonialism. In this performance, presented on film, drops of blood slowly emerge from Mendieta's hairline and roll down her impassive face in an image that recalls the bloodied face of Christ beneath his crown of thorns.

The blood imagery becomes more disturbing in a series of works from 1973 that deal with rape and violence against women. For the first of these, Mendieta invited her fellow students to her apartment, where they encountered her bloody and partially nude body tied to a table. The photograph *Untitled (Rape Scene)*, which came out of the performance, conveys the palpable sense of violation in this work, inspired by the rape/murder of a student on campus. The rape pieces recall other performances of the era, for instance Yoko Ono's 1965 *Cut Piece*, in which Ono sat passively on the floor as viewers were invited to cut off her clothing, and Suzanne Lacy's 1972 performance *Ablutions*, in which a woman was taped to a chair, tied to other objects and covered with various fluids. Also included here is slide documentation of a related work—*Untitled (People Looking at Blood)*.

Untitled (Facial Hair Transplants), 1972.



Untitled (Death of a Chicken), 1972.

Moffitt), 1973. In this piece, Mendieta spilled blood on the sidewalk so that it appeared to be seeping from beneath a nearby door; she watched (and took photos) from a car as passersby appeared to mostly ignore this evidence of possible violence.

A trip to Mexico in the summer of 1973 (the first of a series of summer visits) shifted the direction of her work. Mendieta later noted that Mexico served as a surrogate homeland until she was able to revisit her native Cuba in 1980. As has often been recounted, one of the great traumas of Mendieta's life was her separation from home and family at the age of 13 when she and her sister, Raquelín, were sent to live in a group home in Iowa as part of Operation Pedro Pan. This program, organized by the American Catholic Church, was established to remove Cuban children from threat of Communist indoctrination by the Castro regime. Originally, her parents expected the separation to be short, but the Mendieta sisters had graduated from high school before their mother was able to join them. (Her father, initially a Castro sympathizer, fell out of favor with the regime and was not able to immigrate to America until 1979.)

The Catholic culture of Mexico, as well as the sense of pre-Columbian mysteries that permeated its archeological sites, had a powerful effect on the young exile. In her first trip to Mexico, undertaken with Breder's class, Mendieta created the first *Siluetas*, launching the series of works for which she is best known. In the *Siluetas*, Mendieta merged her body with nature, either literally, by lying naked in various landscapes, or figuratively, by creating silhouettes of her body out of such materials as flowers, rocks, blood, twigs or earth. For the first *Siluetas*, *Imagen de Yagul* (Image from Yagul), Mendieta lay in a recently excavated pre-Columbian tomb and had herself covered in sprays of white flowers. The photograph documenting this action is lyrically beautiful. Lying on the ground within a craggy rock cavity, Mendieta's body seems to be dissolving into a mist of white and green.



Untitled (Blood and Feathers), 1974, color photograph, 10 by 8 inches. Collection Raquelín Mendieta Family Trust. Courtesy the Whitney Museum.

In the period immediately after her death, commentators often saw an ironic twist in the fact that many of her works revealed an obsession with graves, burial and mortality. In fact, however, intimations of death in this and the other *Siluetas* are quickly supplanted by those of rebirth. As Mendieta pointed out, the shallow openings and earth mounds that formed the basis for these works were wombs as well as graves. Her animist leanings reinforced her sense of the cyclical nature of life, in which death is a beginning rather than an end.

For the next eight years, Mendieta continued to make *Siluetas* and to document them in still photographs and films. While the *Siluetas* originated in her sojourns in Mexico, she subsequently created them in a variety of other locations. Many of the early *Siluetas* employ Mendieta's actual body, wrapped, covered with earth, rocks or sand, or otherwise metaphorically merging with nature. Later, it was enough for the body to be suggested by the materials themselves, whose changes and transformations are those of nature itself.

There are many variations within the series. In this show are *Siluetas* that consist of an effigy of twigs placed in the niche of a colonial-era basilica outside Oaxaca; cavities in the earth filled with water, roses or blood; and mounds of earth covered with clover or wildflowers. In one work, red pigment outlining a *Siluetas* on the beach is meant to be swept away by the incoming tide. In another, a flower outline on the surface of a river gradually drifts away. Several involve body-shaped depressions in the earth that are filled with fabric or other combustibles, set afire and left as an imprint of ash.

The films recording some of these processes are among the most beautiful in the show. In *Rock Heart with Blood* (1975), Mendieta places an animal heart in a body-shaped hole, pours blood-red pigment over it and then lies down in the "grave" herself, covering the heart with her naked body in a gesture of protection and assimilation. *Untitled (Genesis Buried in Mud)*, 1975, presents what looks like a mound covered with rocks. Only the

In the '80s, Mendieta became increasingly interested in durable works, creating figure-related sculptures out of materials like carved tree trunks, ficus roots, earth and sand.



Untitled (Silueta Series, Iowa), 1979, color photograph, 20 1/2 by 13 1/2 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Courtesy Galerie Lelong.

gentle swelling motion of the mound reveals Mendieta's presence in the earth.

Some of the most dramatic films deal with fire. In *Alma Silueta en Fuego* (Soul Silhouette on Fire), 1975, we watch the transformation of the silhouette as flames consume a mass of white fabric, briefly producing an incandescent glow before dying down into embers and ash. *Anima, Silueta de Cohetes* (Soul, Silhouette of Fireworks), 1976, consisted of a bamboo armature in the shape of Mendieta's body.

Set upright and lined with fireworks, it bursts into brilliant flame against the night sky and slowly dies away to blackness. Standing next to the screen in the exhibition is a re-creation of the original armature. There is also a re-creation of the aftermath of *Nañigo Burial*, 1976, with a silhouette of black ritual candles that have burned down nearly to the ground, leaving congealed pools of black wax spilling over the floor like lava. Though dramatic, it lacks the vitality of photographic representations of the actual event included in the catalogue.

Works like these point to the importance of fire as a symbolic medium for Mendieta. The process of consumption and transformation by fire brings to mind purification rituals of various traditions as well as the Egyptian myth of the phoenix, which is burned and reborn from the flames every 500 years.

Mendieta remained based in Iowa until 1978, the year after she received an MFA degree in mixed media. However, starting in 1976, she made periodic forays to New York with Breder, during which time she began to cultivate friendships with some of the visiting artists she had met in Iowa and to exhibit in various alternative spaces. Thus, she already had a network and a bit of critical attention when she moved to New York in early 1978. She was initially drawn into the feminist circle that surrounded A.I.R. Gallery, among whose members were Edelson, Nancy Spero, Dotty Attie, Agnes Denes and Pat Lasch. A.I.R. provided a context for Mendieta, and early writing about her work emphasized its connection to universal goddess archetypes, about which there was great interest in the feminist community.

It was at an A.I.R. panel discussion in late 1979 that Mendieta met Carl Andre. She also began to meet members of the expatriate Cuban community who rekindled her interest in revisiting her homeland. Her first opportunity to do so occurred in 1980 when she visited Cuba on a cultural-exchange trip sponsored by a Cuban association in New York. She made seven trips over the next four years, during which time she initiated and elaborated an important new series, the Rupestrian sculptures. These were life-size figures carved and painted on natural limestone, many of which were created with the support of the Cuban government. As documented in photographs here, these have a prehistoric look, bringing to mind ancient petroglyphs in the form of fertility figures. Unlike the Siluetas, which have no internal details, many of these generalized female forms emphasize breasts and genital areas, with a more or less explicit reference to precursors like the Venus of Willendorf. Often they were named after pre-Hispanic goddesses venerated by indigenous Cuban peoples like the Taino and Ciboney. Related works involved sand sculptures dug out of beaches or

formed of wet sand. Over the years, those that survived were often accepted as authentic ritual objects to which locals added flowers, food and other offerings.

Mendieta also began to create similar works back home. The exhibition includes *Maroya* (Moon), 1982. This is a limestone and cement sculpture originally inserted into the ground of the garden of two Miami-based patrons. The figure-shaped cavity has a raw vaginal configuration, and periodically it was filled with gunpowder and ignited on nights with a full moon. Later dug up and preserved, it is presented here with traces of ash still visible in its surface.

As *Maroya* suggests, Mendieta had become increasingly interested in creating more durable works. Several proposals for permanent public works in Cuba came to naught. Back in the United States, she began creating figure-related sculptures out of materials like ficus roots, carved tree trunks, and sand and earth mixed with binder. Her "Totem Grove" series from 1984-85 consists of partially polished tree trunks into which blackened silhouettes have been burned. She also began to create drawings on bark paper, thick copey oak leaves and other natural materials.

The images in both drawings and sculptures consist of various schematic human forms, increasingly abstract and often filled with a spiral of lines. The exhibition includes a selection of these, which are ultimately much less satisfying than the documentation of the ephemeral performances, *Siluetas* and *Rupestrian* sculptures. Created for more conventional gallery presentation than those other works, they seem diminished by comparison.

Mendieta's reputation rests on those earlier works. The pre-Silueta performances, with their emphasis on blood, ritual and transformation, exist in dialogue with more recent works by artists like Jeanne Dunning, Andres Serrano and Kiki Smith, as well as Bruguera and Antoni. They also partake of the current interest in abjection, the grotesque and various revived forms of performance art (most notably Marina Abramovic's *The House with the Ocean View* at Sean Kelly Gallery in New York last year). Meanwhile, the lyrical beauty of the *Siluetas* and *Rupestrian* sculptures, with their emphasis on cycles of destruction and renewal, and their use of fire, earth and water, brings to mind works by artists like Bill Viola, Andy Goldsworthy and Cai Guo-Qiang.

Mendieta's legacy seems to ripple outward like circles of waves radiating from a stone cast in the water. Thus this exhibition is both a revelation and a reminder of what was lost that tragic September night. □

"Ana Mendieta, Earth Body: Sculpture and Performance, 1972-1985" was on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art [July 1-Sept. 19]. It can currently be seen at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden [Oct. 14, 2004-Jan. 2, 2005]. The exhibition travels to the Des Moines Art Center [Feb. 25-May 22, 2005] and the Miami Art Museum [Oct. 7, 2005-Jan. 15, 2006]. The accompanying 286-page catalogue, co-published by the Hirshhorn and Hatje Cantz, includes essays by the show's curator, Olga M. Viso, as well as Julia P. Herzberg, Guy Brett, Chrissie Iles and Laura Roulet.

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View of the "Totem Grove Series," 1984-85, wood and gunpowder; at the Whitney Museum. Photos this page Jerry L. Thompson.

View of 1983-84 earth sculptures, with the video *Untitled (Ochún)*, 1981, on wall; at the Whitney Museum.

