



Ana Mendieta, Tate Modern review: Strange, singular and strikingly contemporary

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Bursting with feathers, flowers, blood and earth, the ephemeral works of the Cuban-American artist, who died at just 36, prove why they will stay the course at this spectacular retrospective

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Ana Mendieta, 'Ñañigo Burial', 1976 (Marian Goodman Gallery/Alison Jacques)

In one of her most famous works, the artist **Ana Mendieta** stands naked on the sandy shores of a stream, pouring a pail of cow's blood over her body. When she's done, droplets of deep red spilling from her limbs, she lies down and rolls around, snow angel-style, in a mass of soft white chicken feathers. She ends up covered, from the neck down, to her fingertips and toes; the odd feather has caught in her dark hair, combed off her face. She's a woman transformed, part-human, part-bird, bizarrely and brilliantly engaged with nature.

The work is called *Blood + Feathers* (1974) and it features in **Tate Modern**'s terrific retrospective of the late great Cuban-American multidisciplinary artist in the form of a photograph and two films, alongside 120 works Mendieta made between the mid-1960s and 1985. During her 20-year career, she moved between drawing, sculpture, performance and so-called earth-body works, exploring notions of existence, decay, and renewal. The result: raw, timely works that challenge traditional notions of art as a fixed object and compel us to pay attention to the natural world.

Born in **Havana, Cuba** in 1948, Mendieta was airlifted to the US aged 12 after Castro's revolution, separated from her homeland and her parents – which explains the interest in shifting states. During a trip to Mexico in 1973, she began her iconic decade-long *Siluetas* Series, depicting fleeting figures in the landscape using grasses, flowers, clay. In the early images, the silhouettes are immediately visible, the plywood outline (which she strapped to the roof of her car) imprinted into mud so wet you can almost hear it squelch. Over time, they become more camouflaged, harder to pick out amid weeds and brambles.

The *Siluetas* appear throughout, alongside photographs and Super 8 films of transient sculptures and performances. There are beautifully delicate abstract drawings on leaves, veins visible, edges crisp, and others on crinkled paper made from bark. Some figures emerge from mounds of sand, while others have been burned using gunpowder into totemic tree trunks that twist towards one another, in charred conversation. (I'm less convinced by the early paintings, as clunky as they are colourful, but thankfully there are only a few; Mendieta swiftly moved onto other mediums.)



'Bird Run' by Ana Mendieta, 1974 (Marian Goodman Gallery/Alison Jacques)

Rather than being arranged chronologically, the work is displayed according to the landscapes and meaningful sites that informed Mendieta's thinking. There's the woodland in which she experimented during her studies in Iowa City, and the public places where she made collaborative pieces after moving to New York in 1978. The first room, devoted to the caverns and shores to which she often returned in Cuba, is perfectly placed in the cool interior of the Blavatnik building, with dappled light filtering through a concrete-mesh window. A dimly lit room devoted to rivers features five films: a body-shaped shroud on fire surrounded by burnt-orange autumn leaves; a roll of turf heaped over a pile of dirt, rising and falling like a chest breathing.

Mendieta always documented her work, enabling her – and Tate – to translate her enticingly ephemeral art into the gallery space. We see black-and-white images of foamy waves nudging towards forms carved into wet sand before spilling in, retreating, and gradually washing them away. There are restaged works, too, among them a *Silueta* made from black ritual candles and a life-size forest recreated with leaves, soil and branches, a spotlight shining on a silhouette shaped from bright-green moss and smooth white stones.



Ana Mendieta, *Untitled* 1977 (*The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection*)

How refreshing, in an art world focused on output, to spend time with an artist dodging permanence. Again and again, Mendieta dissolved her body, hiding behind a bunch of flowers, crawling on all fours beneath the skin of a shepherd dog. One photographic series shows her applying dark hair snipped from the beard of a fellow student to her upper lip, a makeshift moustache. In another, she sculpts her hair with shampoo, experimenting with using herself as a sculpture, like a child might in a bath.

There's something childlike about the second video of her covered with cow blood and chicken feathers, running with carefree abandon along a beach. At first, she's a tiny speck. Then she becomes bigger and bigger, until, in a blur, she barrels past us, and disappears. In 1985, at the height of her career, Mendieta fell 34 floors from the Manhattan apartment she shared with her husband, the minimalist artist Carl Andre; he was charged with murder, and controversially acquitted for lack of evidence. Today, her art – art that's strange and singular and feels strikingly contemporary – lives on, as long-lasting as it was short-lived.