

The tragic death of Ana Mendieta divided the New York art scene, but the Tate reclaims her life's work this summer

After blockbuster shows on Tracey Emin and Frida Kahlo, Tate Modern turns the spotlight on the Cuban-American artist. Long overshadowed by her controversial death at just 36, which inspired books and podcasts, her work deserves to be untethered from her tragic end and discovered by a whole new audience, writes **Katie Rosseinsky**



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y art comes out of rage and displacement," Ana Mendieta once said. "Although the image may not be a very rageful image, I think all art comes out of sublimated rage." As far as mission statements go, it is one that still burns with an

A new print of 'Bird Run' will be shown for the first time at the Tate exhibition (© The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC. Licensed by Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. DACS 2026. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery and Alison Jacques, London)

intensity – just like her blazing **artworks**, which seared her silhouette onto the earth.

Now, more than four decades on from her early **death** – a complicated, much-contested tragedy that would go on to divide **New York**’s art scene – **a new Tate Modern exhibition is set** to celebrate her striking body of work, featuring pieces never before shown in the UK.

And as Mendieta’s life and death inevitably become fodder for the true crime industrial complex, with podcasts such as 2022’s *Death of an Artist* and an upcoming TV series starring America Ferrera, this retrospective feels like an act of reclamation – of putting her art back at the centre of the story.

Her fame outside the art world has never quite hit the heights of the likes of **Tracey Emin** and **Frida Kahlo**, the stars of two of the **Tate**’s summer **blockbuster exhibitions**, but Mendieta was a pioneer whose use of her body as a canvas has profoundly influenced feminist art.

She was **born in Havana** in 1948 to a wealthy middle-class couple embroiled in Cuba’s febrile political scene. Her father, Ignacio, was initially a supporter of Fidel Castro, but his concerns over Castro’s attempts to dismantle the country’s Catholic Church prompted him to join the counter-revolution.

His dissent, he feared, would make his family a target, and in 1961, the Mendieta’s signed up Ana and her older sister Raquelin for Operation Pedro Pan. This clandestine collaboration between the US government and the Catholic Church saw 14,000 unaccompanied Cuban children airlifted to the United States, ostensibly to protect them from Castro’s communism.

When the sisters landed in Miami, Ana “kissed the ground”, Raquelin later recalled. But the pair soon faced a drastic culture shock, a displacement that would play out so prominently in Ana’s art.

The pair were placed in an orphanage in Iowa, and were shuttled between such institutions and foster-care placements; they were often parted from one another for stretches of time. They would not be reunited with their mother and younger brother for five years. Ignacio, meanwhile, was arrested for his involvement in the **botched Bay of Pigs invasion**, and spent 18 years in jail as a political prisoner.



Mendieta burned her outline into natural materials as part of the ‘Silueta’ series (*The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC. Licensed by DACS*)

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During her time at the orphanage, Ana once vowed to her friend and fellow artist Liliana Porter that she would become a criminal or an artist. “Thank God she chose the latter,” Porter later reflected.

While studying art at the University of Iowa, Ana became dissatisfied with painting, and the limits it imposed on her creativity. “The works that I was making were not real enough for me,” she later recalled. “They were not projecting this magic, this energy I wanted the works to have.”

It was not until she enrolled in the institution's “Intermedia” programme that she adopted the vibrantly multi-disciplinary approach that would come to characterise her art. She began to place herself into her work, creating pieces that were hard to look at, but harder to look away from.

In 1973, a fellow Iowa student named Sarah Ann Ottens was raped and murdered on campus. Mendieta struggled to get this horrifying crime – and the sensationalist press response – out of her mind. She would later ask her fellow students to come to her flat, where she had tied herself face-down to the table, with her arms bound and her bare legs covered in blood.



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They stayed there for an hour, while Mendieta remained absolutely still; the photos they took to document her work became known as *Untitled (Rape Scene)*. They are so unsettling in part because Mendieta is both victim and, as the orchestrator of the scene, perpetrator; the viewer becomes complicit, too.

She would stage more pieces inspired by the killing, drenching the street outside her apartment with blood bought from the local butcher. “Each time she assembled one of her nightmarish scenes, she was making it apparent that a crime had been committed, a bloody stain that would not wash out,” the author **Olivia Laing** wrote in the 2021 book *Everybody*. Mendieta, Laing said, was forcing violence against women “into visibility, making it indelible, impossible to ignore”.



“Imágen de Yágul” was Mendieta’s first ‘Silueta’ (The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC. Licensed by Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. DACS 2026. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery and Alison Jacques, London)

Later that year, on a trip to an archaeological site in Oaxaca, Mexico, Mendieta would create the first piece in her *Silueta* series, *Imagen de Yágul*. She lay naked in an ancient tomb, white flowers obscuring her face and body. “I have been carrying out a dialogue between the landscape and the female body (based on my own silhouette),” Mendieta wrote in 1981, looking back at the series. “I believe this has been a direct result of my having been torn from my homeland (Cuba) during my adolescence.”

Valentine Umansky, the Tate’s curator for international art, hopes that in spending time with these pieces – and with Mendieta’s work overall – visitors can reflect on “the possibility to transform”.

It was through the New York art scene that Mendieta met her future husband Carl Andre, an acclaimed artist 13 years her senior, who had pioneered the Minimalist movement in the Sixties. The relationship, according to Mendieta’s friends, was always a tempestuous one, but the couple eventually married in Rome at the start of 1985, after six years together, on and off; Mendieta had been awarded the American Academy’s prestigious Rome Prize a few years earlier and was completing a residency there.

Connecting the interior and exterior of the museum was a “crucial” part of staging the Mendieta exhibition, Umansky adds. If you look out through the window just before you enter the show, she explains, you will be able to see Mendieta’s work from her “Arbol de la Vida” or “Tree of Life” series. The tree trunk, Umansky says, becomes a “vertical axis connecting sky and earth”; on each side of it, “you have these curvy linear shapes that make a silhouette or an outline of the body”.



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This “porosity” between art and the outside world was also “very much the ethos of Ana”, Umansky says, and of the artists she would meet when she swapped Iowa for New York in the late Seventies, who were “thinking very politically about what it means to make art that is accessible”.

But just eight months later, back in New York, Andre would make a 911 call from their apartment in the early hours. His wife, he told the operator, had “somehow gone out of the window”. Mendieta had dropped 33 storeys from their flat in Greenwich Village, and her husband was charged with second-degree murder.

He maintained his innocence, and in court, his lawyers would argue that she had fallen by accident or died by suicide. They also used Mendieta’s art – the way it grappled with blood, violence and ritual – to attempt to prove her suicidality, reducing it to foreshadowing. Andre was eventually acquitted, after the judge ruled that there was insufficient evidence to prove his guilt beyond reasonable doubt.

The harrowing circumstances of Mendieta’s death have made her a posthumous locus for protest. In 1992, the Guggenheim Museum in New York opened its SoHo spin-off gallery with a show featuring Andre’s work; when it opened, a crowd of about 500 people congregated outside, their banners asking: “Where is Ana Mendieta?” They wanted to know, had the art world forgotten her and her story?

And yet there is a risk that in zeroing in upon this, we tie her work forever to her fall, in just another iteration of that lawyerly attempt to cast her art as a tragic portent. For her family, the constant focus on her passing – the books, the podcasts, the planned TV show – has been troubling, too. “How many times does she have to fall?” Mendieta’s niece Raquel asked *The New York Times* in 2024.