

# Arts

## Life&Arts



# A body of work at one with nature

**Ana Mendieta** | The Cuban-American shaped

'land art' in her own image, as a compelling survey

at Tate Modern shows, writes *Simon Schama*

With Frida Kahlo and Tracey Emin packing them in at Tate Modern, it's hard not to notice that some of the strongest women artists have made their mark with the history of their own bodies.

The dramatic self-scrutiny of those artists has often been tragic: informed by marks of pain and calamity; wounds made somewhat bearable by the strenuous act of art-making. Those images might be brutally unsparing or freely self-promoting but, either way, they supply the elements of a persona: a consciously outward-facing character.

In her twenties, Ana Mendieta, the Cuban-American subject of a compelling, often very beautiful survey at Tate Modern, tried on some of this confrontational self-projection. The results are mostly sophomoric: thickly modelling her hair with shampoo so it stood out from and over her face; squashing her features against glass, a bit like the young Rembrandt trying on faces in the mirror to rehearse characters in his histories.

But Mendieta's art turned original and memorable when she did the opposite:

effacing herself into the nature with which the bodies of women have been associated as long as there has been art at all: echoing in outline in sand, mud or fire the broad shape of *terra mater*, the countless figurines of Earth Mother fertility found all over the ancient Near East.

After becoming a fellow of the American Academy in Rome in 1983, Mendieta visited Neolithic sites in Malta and Ireland – but her fixation with the indivisibility of biology and ecology, female fertility and nature's fecundity ran deeper and longer. In 1977 she cast a branding iron in the shape of her own hand, with which she then burnt an impression on to coarsely woven paper, and ornamented with fine blades of grass and straw. She called the print "Rites and Ritual of Initiation". The image was also a re-enactment of hand stencils found in Palaeolithic sites in Cantabria, many of which are of a size indicating they were made by women.

At her best, Mendieta was always looking backwards – into deep time and towards the home from which she felt exiled. After the 1959 Cuban revolution, Mendieta's father, a lawyer in pre-

revolutionary Cuba, would be imprisoned by the Castro government. Well before that, 12-year-old Ana and her sister were taken out of Cuba by the Catholic Welfare Bureau's "Operation Peter Pan". But instead of being settled amid Miami's Cuban community, she ended up fostered in Dubuque, Iowa, leaving her with an acute sense of having been torn from home, yearning for communion with landscapes that had nothing in common with the prairie.

Early efforts at recovering native memory took the form of painting herself in the guise of characters from what she imagined to be Taíno myths, clumsy exercises in primitivism that were mercifully abandoned. But when one of her teachers at the University of Iowa art school took his students to Oaxaca in Mexico, visits to ancient burial sites began to trigger ways in which Mendieta might use her own body; folded into nature, to describe the flow of time from birth to death. One photograph has her lying naked atop a Zapotec tomb site, much of her head and body obscured by wildflowers. "I was covered," she wrote, "by time and history." But it was when she hit on summary lines of female body shape – the *Siluetas* – that Mendieta found the defining forms of her poetically profound art.

Site-specific, her interventions are minimal and all the more suggestive for being so: the silhouette described by an arrangement of yellow wild flowers set on a bed of wild grass, or by the curvy indentations she found on a muddy river bank. Much of this work was



Top, from left: 'Untitled (Guanaroca: First Woman)' from 1981; 'Imágen de Yágul' (1973); 'Untitled: Silueta Series' (1976)

Above: 'Untitled (Leaf Drawing)' from c1984  
Estate of Ana Mendieta, LLC/Artist Rights Society (ARS) New York; DACS, 2020; courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery and Alison Jacques, London

Her work recalls art made before it was called art, still inseparable from the natural world

necessarily ephemeral; the lines washed or blown away, but captured with stunningly beautiful photography, mostly printed only after her death in 1985.

One of those photographs from a later series desists from almost any intervention at all; framing alone prompting recognition of female forms suggested merely by the projections and fissures of the rock surface. This registration of the organic correspondences between natural and female attributes – the push and pull of the tides, governed by the cycles of lunar orbit; the menstrual calendar of fertility – made Mendieta unique among the "land artists" of the 1960s and 1970s. The genre was dominated by the masculine heft of the likes of Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer, whose bulldozing interventions on the landscape were all about the surrender of nature to muscular reshaping.

Mendieta's art has its own share of drama, but one composed with the materials of natural life: feathers, sand, blood, rock and water rather than bulldozers and pick-up trucks. At its simplest and strongest, hers is an art that recalls work made before it was given that name, still organically inseparable from the natural world in which it arose.

In 1980, the lifting of travel restrictions made it possible for her, at last, to return to Cuba. A year later she made the *esculturas rupestres* that are stunning in their marrying together of female and natural forms, never forcing but suggesting images of women with their knees drawn up as if in the act of birth, clefts and fissures of poetic depth. One

of the most lyrical is nothing more than curving lines of mud through which a tidal flow of seawater washes, yet somehow goes straight to our deepest feelings for the generation of life.

Beautiful as this work is, it is also relentlessly single-minded. Whether Mendieta would have expanded both vision and execution we will never know, because on September 8 1985, she fell to her death from the 34th floor of the New York apartment block she shared with her husband, the standard-issue minimalist Carl André.

Screams of "no" had been heard by a doorman shortly before and there were scratches on André's face. André told the police and the court that tried him in 1988 for her murder that she had either died by suicide or had accidentally fallen from the window. But Mendieta was just 5ft tall and would have had to climb on to the sill for that to have happened. André was acquitted.

Neither the exhibition's wall captions nor its catalogue say a word about this brutal termination of a life and work that was blooming. There is something to be said for not allowing the horror to overshadow the art; to permit it to breathe in its own right as if the calamity had never happened. But it did happen; and the magnitude of the tragedy is made all the more devastating by the beauty of art which, in our own time of nature's degradation, delivers a needed reminder that every day another wound opens in the body of *terra mater*.

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