

# ANA MENDIETA

EARTH BODY

SCULPTURE AND  
PERFORMANCE

1972-1985



*Untitled* (Facial Cosmetic Variations), 1972  
35 mm color slides  
© Estate of Ana Mendieta  
Collection, courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York

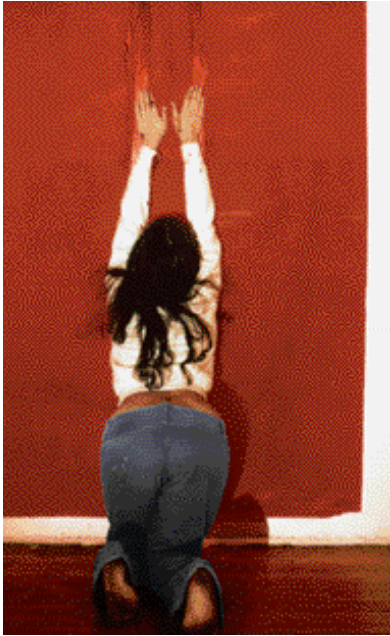
This exhibition examines the brief yet prolific career of Ana Mendieta and traces her development from early performances of the 1970s to sculpture and objects from the early 1980s made of fragile, earthen materials. Born in Havana, Cuba in 1948, Mendieta came to the United States, in 1961, without her parents. She and her elder sister joined fourteen thousand Cuban children whose exile from Fidel Castro's Communist revolution in Cuba was aided by the United States Catholic Church. Placed in foster care in Iowa, the Mendieta sisters would not see their parents again for many years. Mendieta's personal and professional development was greatly informed by the painful experience of exile as well as the intersection of Caribbean and North American cultures. The artist later commented:

*I have been carrying on a dialogue between the landscape and the female body (based on my silhouette). I believe this to be a direct result of my having been torn away from my homeland during my adolescence. I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb (nature). My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that tie me to the universe.*

Mendieta emerged as an artist in the 1970s, a decade of significant artistic experimentation in which “body art” (also called “performance art”) became a primary mode of expression for artists who worked across media and used film and video to document ephemeral actions in the gallery, on the street, or in the landscape. Contributing to the development of performance art and land art (also called earthworks), Mendieta described her actions in which she inserted her naked figure (or its outline or contours) in nature as “earth body works.” Documented on 8mm film, 35 mm slides, and printed photographs, traces of Mendieta's actions are presented with residual performance objects, as well as independent drawings and sculptures made at the end of her career.

## EARLY INTERMEDIA WORK

As a graduate student at the University of Iowa in 1970, Mendieta became involved with the Intermedia Program and Center for New Performing Arts, both founded by her professor and later, her partner Hans Breder. Breder's weekly Intermedia workshops brought together faculty and students from the visual and performing arts, as well as literature, and the sciences, to exchange ideas and create collaborative art works. Exposed to Breder's teachings about fostering relationships across disciplines and an impressive roster of visiting artists—Vito Acconci, Willoughby Sharp, Elaine Summers, and Robert Wilson—who were at the forefront of the burgeoning new “body work,” Mendieta moved away from expressionist easel painting to a performance-



## FILMS

During the 1970s, artists used the camera to record, measure, and document ephemeral, time-based actions. Still and film cameras played a central role in Mendieta's art as silent witnesses to her activities in the gallery, on the street, and in nature. She made numerous slide sequences and nearly eighty films.

In *Body Tracks*, Mendieta dipped her hands in mixtures of animal blood and red paint and dragged her fingers down the wall. Related photographs, a film, and the physical traces of Mendieta's performance (paper backdrops that recorded her imprint) provide a variety of ways to experience the performance. Mendieta used blood repeatedly in the early 1970s. Several works allude to violence against women and were made in response to a rape at the University of Iowa campus. Mendieta was also fascinated by the symbolic power of blood and its ritual significance in Roman Catholicism and in the pre-Hispanic civilizations in Mexico she studied. The artist commented, "I started using blood—I guess because I think it's a very powerful, magical thing. I don't see it as a negative force."



## SILUETA SERIES

Mendieta traveled extensively in Mexico throughout the 1970s. Adopting the country as a surrogate homeland, she worked in the landscape and in Mesoamerican ruins virtually every summer between 1973 and 1980. The artist stated, "Plugging into Mexico was like going back to the source, being able to get some magic just by being there." Key conceptual underpinnings of her art, such as her abiding respect for nature, ideas about rebirth and regeneration, and the desire to fuse her body with the land, came as a result of her immersion in traditional Mexican life and culture.

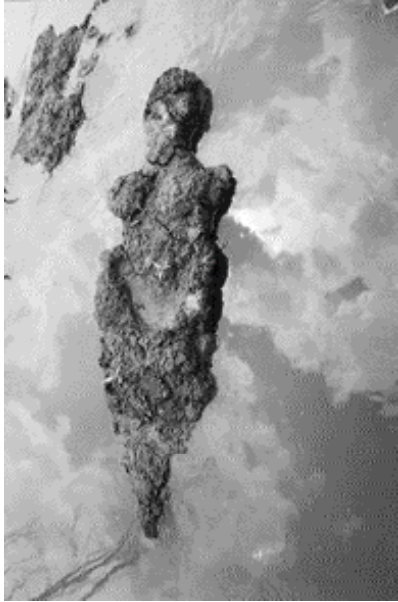
In 1973, Mendieta began the Silueta Series, hundreds of earth-body works made in Iowa and Mexico, in which she covered her body with flowers and earth, drew the outline of her figure with rocks, grasses, vines, and set her silhouette alight with candles, fire, and gunpowder. Many of Mendieta's films and slides capture the burning of Siluetas as well as their ashen remains. Fascinated by cross-cultural archetypes, Mendieta frequently appropriated symbols and rituals from African, Afro-Cuban, Amerindian, Mesoamerican, and ancient European and Asian cultures, in particular the image of a fertile goddess with upraised arms. She reinvented diverse symbolic systems, turning them into something that was a "reflection of herself," a global citizen living between and across cultures.

Top left:  
*Untitled* (Body Tracks), 1974  
Lifetime color photograph  
Collection Raquelín Mendieta  
Family Trust; courtesy Galerie Lelong,  
New York

Mendieta frequently documented her actions on 8mm film as well as in 35mm

Bottom left:  
*Imagen de Yagul* (Image from Yagul), 1973  
35 mm slide  
©Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection,  
courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York  
Photo by Hans Breder

The first of the artist's Silueta series, executed in a Mesoamerican tomb at the



## THE RETURN TO CUBA

In 1980, eighteen years after her traumatic exile, Mendieta returned to the island of her birth; she made a total of seven trips to the island between 1980 and 1983. During these years she developed strong ties with a community of emerging Cuban artists and immersed herself in the island's rich African diaspora traditions. Through the auspices of the Cuban Ministry of Culture, Mendieta made the Rupestrian (carved rock) Sculptures in 1981, a series of carved and painted works nestled in the rocky outcroppings of Jaruco National Park outside Havana. She named the hovering figures after Amerindian (Ciboney and Taíno) goddesses. Bringing the Silueta Series to "its source," the Rupestrian Series marks the end of the artist's Silueta Series.

## SCULPTURES AND OBJECTS

Throughout the early 1980s, Mendieta carried out a number of experiments in which she sought to extend aspects of performance in the creation of permanent art works. In 1982, she made *Maroya*, a gunpowder sculpture that could be relit over time. In 1983, she accepted a residency at the American Academy in Rome. There she made a significant number of drawings, sculptures of earth and sand, and totemic wooden sculptures carved and burned with gunpowder. The totem grove sculptures were found in her studio in Rome after her death at age 36. Mendieta died from a fall from a high-rise apartment window in September 1985.

Although Ana Mendieta died while still struggling to establish her career, her contribution to the art of our time is significant. Her fusion of media, synthesis of sculpture and performance, and her embrace of transcultural identity as vital subject matter in her art, have served as touchstones for younger generations of artists (Janine Antoni, Tania Bruguera, and Naomi Fisher) grappling with similar concerns. Her haunting cipher—the naked female form that performs in the studio, merges with the landscape, is drawn on a leaf, or is burned into the soil or a tree trunk—remains firmly at the center of her production.

Olga Viso  
Deputy Director  
Hirshhorn Museum

See Mendieta's sculpture of burning candles aflame on October 14 and 16, 12:00–5:00 pm. Check [www.hirshhorn.si.edu](http://www.hirshhorn.si.edu) for additional times.

Top left *Isla* (Island), 1981  
Black and white photograph  
© Estate of Ana Mendieta,  
courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York  
The earthen figure surrounded by water alludes to the shape of the island of Cuba as well as the artist's body.

Bottom left *Untitled*, 1982  
Drawing on leaf  
Private Collection; courtesy the owner  
Mendieta drew directly on fresh green leaves and incorporated their natural decay as part of her artistic process. The leaves continue to "perform" as they dry and discolor.





*Ana Mendieta: Earth Body Sculpture and Performance 1972–1985*  
was organized by the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,  
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

The exhibition is made possible by The Henry Luce Foundation, the Latino Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Center for Latino Initiatives, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Bruce T. Halle Family Foundation, and The Judith Rothschild Foundation. Initial research was supported by Craig Robins and a Curatorial Research Fellowship from the Getty Grant Program. Additional support for the exhibition catalogue was made possible through the generosity of Carlos and Rosa de la Cruz and Isabel and Ricardo Ernst.

Whitney Museum of American Art  
New York, New York  
July 1 – September 19, 2004

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden  
October 14, 2004 – January 2, 2005

Des Moines Art Center, Iowa  
February 25 – May 22, 2005

Miami Art Museum, Florida  
October 2, 2005 – January 15, 2006

*Portrait of Ana Mendieta*

Black and white photograph  
Photo by Mary Beth Edelson  
© The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection,  
courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York

Cover (detail): *Untitled* (Blood and  
Feathers), 1974  
Lifetime color photograph  
Collection Raquelín Mendieta Family  
Trust; courtesy Galerie Lelong,  
New York



Smithsonian  
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden

[www.hirshhorn.si.edu](http://www.hirshhorn.si.edu)