

Ana Mendieta and Hans Breder

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A salutary foray into the history of postwar performance art and video, this pairing of work by Ana Mendieta and Hans Breder conjured an informative, if somewhat uneasy, reunion between the late, celebrated Cuban-born artist and her former professor, longtime romantic partner, and frequent collaborator. The work on view—mostly photographs but also films and videos made by the two during the course of a relationship that spanned the 1970s—did share the same central fascination: the female body, specifically Mendieta's. But the dramatic distinctions between the two artists' tone and approach, and the divergence in the way the two strands of work regard their dominant subject, produce a study less of collaborative congruence than of fundamental difference.

The forty-odd works and twelve pieces of documentation shown come from the decade after the artists met in 1969—Mendieta, a twenty-year-old graduate student in the fledgling Intermedia Program at the University of Iowa; Breder, a charismatic German émigré thirteen years her senior, the program's founder and director. Breder had arrived in Iowa, after a stint in New York, with an awareness of Fluxus, Actionism, and other boundary-blurring international trends, and initiated the intermedia department in 1968 to spread the new doctrine of interdisciplinarity to adventurous Midwestern MFA students like Mendieta (who had grown up in foster homes in nearby Dubuque after arriving in the US from Cuba when she was twelve). He introduced his classes to artists with strong iconoclastic streaks—Vito Acconci, Mary Beth Edelson, Allan Kaprow, and many others visited Iowa City over the years—and Mendieta clearly internalized the chance-taking approaches she encountered there, inflecting them with her own terrestrial feminism to produce a ritualistic, revelatory brand of performative art.

Breder, meanwhile, became Mendieta's collaborator and documentarian, roles with apparently considerable overlap between their functions. Yet for all his pedagogical skill and progressive thinking in terms of process, Breder's own art often demonstrates an oddly retrograde surrealistic romanticism, as in the works on view from 1970 and 1971 featuring various models (including Mendieta) shot in and along the shore of an Iowa stream. In *Moon Bright Sonata*, 1971, a languorous nine-minute, fifty-one-second black-and-white video, a supine woman in the creek's shallows is occasionally stirred by the kisses of a naked Mendieta as if in some eroticized Maxfield Parrish tableau.

Such work seems a world away from the ferocious eruptions of gender and identity politics that would emerge just a year later in the works of Breder's star pupil, like the harrowing ceremony of her video

Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Facial Hair Transplants)*, 1972. black-and-white photograph, 10 x 8".



Untitled (Chicken Piece), 1972, in which the naked artist clutches a headless bird flapping through its death throes. This gap between the full-blooded force of Mendieta and the rather bloodless formality of Breder is similarly played out in a comparison of each artist's signature gesture regarding the female form—the latter's photographs of nudes holding mirrors that fracture their bodies into objectified tangles of torsos and limbs and the former's "*Siluetas*" (Silhouettes), 1973–80, any one of which evokes more bodily presence in its elegaic vacancy than all of the teeming corporeality of Breder's compositions put together.

The exhibition's most galvanizing work, *Ocean Bird Wash Up*, 1974, demonstrates the same kind of discrepancy. Filmed by Breder in Mexico, but clearly depicting a scenario of Mendieta's devising, the four-minute, thirty-second Super 8 film again finds a young woman in shallow water (Mendieta, covered in the white feathers she sometimes utilized for her performances of the era). But rather than functioning as a lolling, sexualized icon of classical femininity as the female subject did in the work's Iowa analog of three years earlier, Mendieta is here vitally committed to her own activity, allowing herself to be tossed on the waves and onto the shore, where she's washed into the branches of a downed tree. It's the kind of vivid, risky work Breder the teacher would no doubt have championed, even if he couldn't muster it in his own art—a "Do as I say, not as I do" moment that emphasized both the basis for the affinity between the two artists and the gulf that separated them.

—Jeffrey Kastner