

Ana Mendieta to get 'long overdue' UK retrospective

Work of Cuban-American artist, who died in New York in 1985, encompassed performance, film and sculpture

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Ana Mendieta: Untitled (Grass on Woman), 1972. Photograph: The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection

Ana Mendieta has been described as one of the "most significant yet unacknowledged" artists of her generation on the eve of the first UK retrospective of her work, 27 years after her unexpected and controversial death.

Stephanie Rosenthal, chief curator of the exhibition, which opens on Tuesday at [London's Hayward gallery](#), said the show was long overdue.

Mendieta was important, she said, for so many genres and theories – [performance art](#), land art, sculpture, film, feminist art – and had been in so many group shows all over the world that it was time for people to see her work by itself and in depth "instead of seeing it in a context other people have put her in".

Mendieta's name will be unfamiliar to most people and her work is inevitably overshadowed by her remarkable personal story – not least her death in 1985, aged 36, when she fell from the 34th floor Greenwich Village apartment she shared with her husband, the minimalist artist Carl Andre.

Andre – best known in the UK for [his bricks at Tate Modern](#) – was tried and acquitted of her murder. Friends and family have always maintained that Mendieta would not have thrown herself from the window.

Her sister Raquelin said the new exhibition was not the time to talk about her death. "My family has its own interpretation of what happened based on facts but there is no point talking about that," she said. "I don't want it to get in the way of the work. Her death has really nothing to do with her work. Her work was about life and power and energy and not about death."

Raquelin said the London show was wonderful. "Ana was very ambitious, she wanted to have an impact on art history, she wanted to have an impact on the world of art, she wanted people to look at her work and have a powerful experience and she wanted to inspire people to be creative.

"No matter how many times I see the work together like this it always feels the same – it feels like she is watching over. She's watching over the work, she's watching over the show and she's pleased."

Mendieta was born in Cuba and sent to the US when she was 12 by her father, a Castro opponent who feared for his family's safety. She was prolific in what was a brief career and the exhibition brings together works that show the full range of her practice – including performance, film and sculpture.

Some of it is challenging. For example, for her 1973 work Rape Scene – which she made while at the University of Iowa in response to the rape and murder of another student – Mendieta was tied to a table with her lower body naked and smeared with cow's blood, remaining motionless for two hours. Fellow students – all male – were asked to come to her apartment at a pre-arranged time where they would be witness to the 'murder scene'.

It was also in Iowa that Mendieta made her first 'earth body' sculpture, for which she lay naked face down and asked fellow students to glue blades of grass along her back.

Key works in the show include the Siluetas, essentially private works that she made between 1973 and 1981 in which she recorded her physical presence in outdoor locations.

Raquelin Mendieta said the Hayward exhibition brought a compelling thread to her sister's work. "She always had a direction – that feeling that everything is connected."

Her sister revealed that Mendieta was latterly experimenting with bronze and recalled going to her studio in Rome after her death and seeing a cactus covered in beeswax in preparation for being cast.

"You do feel the sadness that she's not with us and you wonder where she would have gone with her work."