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'Traces': The Hayward Gallery's new retrospective of Ana Mendieta

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Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Body Tracks)*, 1974. Colour photograph, lifetime print. 25.4 x 20.3 cm. Collection Igor DaCosta. © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection. Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York and Paris and Alison Jacques Gallery, London.

The Hayward Gallery's new retrospective of the often overlooked Ana Mendieta is imbued with an overwhelming morosity. It tells the story, chronologically, of a unique body of work from this inspiring, but frequently dark artist. In this way we can easily trace the development in Mendieta's work from her earlier playful pieces such as *Facial Hair Transplant* (1972) to later, more solitary works made when she was living in New York in the years before her premature death in 1985.

It is the knowledge of her sad eventuality that affords the show a somewhat sombre ambience. The shadows of her 'Silhouetta' series which dominated the later portion of her work allude to her emotional struggles. Through these pieces she tried to make her own mark on the landscape, to connect to the land, to find a sense of identity in the United States as a political exile from Cuba.



Ana Mendieta, *Blood and Feathers #2*, 1974. Colour photograph, lifetime print. 25.4 x 20.3 cm. Collection Raquelín Mendieta Family Trust. © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection. Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York and Paris and Alison Jacques Gallery, London.

Mendieta referred to herself as both sculptor and photographer, eschewing the label of 'performance artist' which she invariably attracted. Her work is difficult to pigeon-hole, simultaneously ephemeral and tangible. But her use of blood in video works like *Blood and Feathers* (1974) and *Rape Scene* (1973) certainly facilitate parallels with feminist performance art. These, and other early works are indeed shocking, but blood also has connotations of life, presence and the organic, which energises these pieces, making for a compelling viewing experience.

Through a diverse curatorial framework the Hayward show sheds light on the beautiful but complex work of this experimental artist. Some rooms are presented as Mendieta curated them herself in her lifetime, and in the final room you can peruse the extensive archive of photographs she left behind. 'Traces' presents a long overdue, thought-provoking look at Mendieta's oeuvre, which spanned many genres, encompassing a wide range of materials. While the silhouettes she left in the landscape have faded, her photographs, drawings and videos stand the test of time.