

# Aesthetica



## Review of Ana Mendieta: Traces at the Hayward Gallery, London

*Traces* marks the UK's first retrospective of work by Ana Mendieta through an extensive exhibition of films, sculptures, photographs, drawings, personal writings and notebooks, and a slide-room revealing the comprehensive nature of her oeuvre. Before her untimely death in 1985, Mendieta produced a multi-faceted body of work that not only challenged traditional conventions of exhibiting and collecting art, but also enabled her to be situated as a legendary artist in an art historical context as well as the scope of contemporary art today.

The Hayward Gallery presents the evolution of Mendieta's work chronologically, beginning with the start of her art career in the 1970s. It was during this period, when pursuing a Master's degree in painting, that Mendieta began using her body as the content and medium for her work. Three series of self-portraits are featured here: *Untitled* (Facial Hair Transplant) the artist with transfers of hair from a friend's beard, *Untitled* (Facial Cosmetic Variations) alterations of herself with various wigs, stockings, and heavy makeup, and *Untitled* (Glass on Body Imprints) in which she pressed parts of her naked body against a pane of glass for a performance captured on camera. Mendieta further explored performance and film with a second MA in Intermedia and it was in this context that she created her 'earth-body' sculptures that merged performance art, body art, and earth and formed the foundation of her artistic practice. Documenting her performance pieces became an integral part of her process, which is exemplified in her first tableau *Rape Scene* that intended to direct attention to sexual violence with a narrative based on a real-life murder. Room 2 neatly displays Mendieta's blood-drenched series, inspired by the Afro-Cuban ritualistic Santeria practices and performances by the Viennese Actionists, alongside photographs, drawings, and films of iconic works.

Her parallel interest in ancient and indigenous cultures led to the "Siluetas" where Mendieta would cover herself in flowers and other materials from the earth in a way of showing nature taking over the body. First created in Mexico in an ancient Zapotec grave, this series was embedded with themes of burial practices and regeneration. Mendieta continued this series in Mexico and Iowa, using her body and then later leaving its imprint. Rooms 3 through to 5 focus on the time between 1973 and 1981 when she produced over 100 of these works, including the symbolic *Tree of Life* series. The Hayward maintains its clean presentation throughout the exhibition, yet shifts its approach with the re-construction of the artist's solo exhibitions that took place during her lifetime. Room 6 displays photographs of Mendieta's rock carvings in Cuba, while Room 7 showcases drawings on normal paper and bark paper, which then leads to her drawings on leaves in Room 8. Room 9 features her later outdoor sculptural pieces, consisting of wood planks and are said to have more in common with Neolithic art than contemporary land art. Whereas the exhibition seems to lose its energy in the latter rooms, *Traces* ends effectively with the slide-room of archival materials highlighting the work produced during Mendieta's short life, although without informing visitors of the impact her tragic death had on her reputation as an artist.