

Covered in Time and History: The Films of Ana Mendieta

By Joan Lee | 10 May 2018



Ana Mendieta, *Sweating Blood*, 1973, Super 8 film, colour, silent,
Credit : Photo: The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC., courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co.

Ana Mendieta remains a significant artistic figure of the 1970s and 1980s because of her radical practice encompassing performance, gender and geo-political identity. The extensive self-documentation of her performances (which were often enacted alone) on primarily Super 8 film has allowed for her works to survive to this day.

Covered in Time and History: The Films of Ana Mendieta, features 23 restored and digitized films, 3 of which are being publicly circulated for the first time. The films span six rooms and are cohesively grouped in such a way as to make visible the artist's visual and personal narrative.

In the first room, the first film to the right is 'Silueta del Laberinto (Labyrinth Blood Imprint)' (1974), created in Yágul, Mexico. Made in broad daylight, the film moves shakily within an ancient maze, the sense of abandonment heightened by the absence of people and sound. Reaching a clearing, the camera settles on a glimmering imprint in the earth, what looks like dark blood in the shape of a human figure. The film is one of many that feature the artist's use of blood, a ritualistic and symbolic medium recalling femininity, life energy and the traditional uses of blood throughout various cultures including indigenous Mexican societies.

The other films in the room include untitled works from her Silueta Series, in which Mendieta's form is imprinted on to the earth and abandoned, sometimes left ablaze, as in 'Volcán' (1979), a Super 8 silent film in colour, where a raised mound bearing a human silhouette is present and fire and smoke are billowing from its centre. The reoccurring motif of human silhouettes in the earth evokes notions of death and cultural memory, their ephemerality adding to Mendieta's exploration of themes surrounding the passage of time and the return to one's homeland.

In the second room, the films are grouped by their shared motif of blood. 'Blood Inside Outside' (1975), one of the films being shown publicly for the first time, depicts the artist standing nude beside a creek in Iowa (where she completed her graduate studies in art), methodically covering herself in blood until her face and body gleam red. Another film is the iconic work 'Sweating Blood' (1973) a silent colour film depicting Mendieta's still countenance as blood slowly drips from her crown.

Throughout the rest of the rooms, a consistent study of material is made evident, including Mendieta's fascinating experimentation with film, as seen in 'Energy Charge' (1975), a brilliant work that utilizes modern film technique to create the supernatural effect of a life-giving tree that glows red upon contact. Mendieta's mythos which is based on indigenous, including Afro-Cuban, cultures, carries on throughout the exhibition and is evident in her symbolic use of the body and its relationship to nature.

The final room in the exhibition features several significant works that recount Mendieta's return to Cuba in 1981. 'Untitled' (1981), publicly shown for the first time, is a film made on the beaches of Guanabo in Havana, Cuba. Here, a silhouette rests on the sandy shores amidst crashing waves, evoking the artist's own Odyssean journey. The work recalls the artist's painful history of estrangement from her family during Operation Peter Pan, in which en masse, Cuban youths were sent to the United States for fear of indoctrination by the Cuban government. Mendieta eventually settled in Iowa with her sister, to be joined by her mother and brother five years later, while her father remained in Cuba under political arrest.

Notably, one of the films in this room, is also Mendieta's last work, 'Ochún' (1981). Named after an ancient Santería goddess, it depicts a silhouette of mud in rippling water off the coast of Florida. Intentional in location, the film refers to the separation between Cuba and the United States, and the desire for the transcendence of borders. Mendieta's call for self-reclamation and healing after trauma speaks throughout the exhibition, a singular voice that continues to reverberate today.