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"Sweating
Blood,"
1973,
Ana Mendieta
Film super-8.

PARIS

The Connections and Burdens of Ana Mendieta

Upon entering "Covered in Time and History: The Films of Ana Mendieta," a new exhibition at the Jeu de Paume in Paris, the visitor encounters a photograph of a woman lying on an Aztec tomb, covered in weeds, grass and white flowers. It is an image of the Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta, herself, who appears as vulnerable as she is camouflaged in the image, titled "Imagen de Yágul," 1973/2018. The image is paired with two films she made in 1974 ("Burial Pyramid" and "Labyrinth Blood Imprint") and a quote in which Mendieta expresses how basking in these natural elements was like being "covered by time and history."

The phrase, which conjures up connections and burdens, inspired the title of this exhibition, which runs from October 16 to January 27.

Howard Oransky, who first encountered Mendieta's work in 1978 and co-curated this

show with Lynn Lukkas, said that Mendieta was always adept at "using her body and using the idea of the body" — of giving of herself while highlighting the pervasive expectations projected onto women.

This show, which traveled in the U.S. and Germany before arriving in France, encompasses 20 video pieces that place the moving image as a centripetal force in Mendieta's work. The selection draws from the artist's archival filmography of 104 videos which, over three years, was inventoried and digitized in high definition (including a previously undiscovered work from 1981).

Film provides an especially powerful entry point by which to explore recurrent themes for the artist: memory, ritual, gender and the powerful union between body and earth, in which nature serves as a raw tangible resource. For Oransky, the

historical importance of France to the development of photography and film, coupled with the pioneering warp of the French New Wave, feel like a poignant context in which to view Mendieta's work, given this "revolution in the conception of film and cinema that asserted the importance of the artistic vision of the maker."

Mendieta's short-lived career belies the pluridisciplinary body of the work she produced between 1971 to 1985, the year she died. In this exhibition, the artist becomes the arbiter of her own legacy: her own words set the tone, and her films communicate the fragility of the body and heighten the beauty and danger in its pliant gestures. "At its core, we find a sustained engagement with what it means to be a human being living in this world," Oransky stated of her filmography. "Anyone who has ever asked themselves these kinds of questions will find value and reward in the experience of her work."

Galerie Lelong & Co.

Paris – New York



LEFT:
"Creek," 1974,
Ana Mendieta
Film Super-8.

BELOW:
"Anima, Silueta de Cohetes
(Firework Piece)," 1976,
Ana Mendieta
Film Super-8.



Mendieta, who was born in Havana in 1948, was sent to the United States in 1961 — via Operation Peter Pan, which exiled unaccompanied Cuban minors en masse — and would not return to her native terrain until 1980. The resulting sense of displacement colored her life and her artistic practice. The artist's "Silueta Series," consisting of multiple videos created between 1973-80 in Iowa and Mexico, is her most well-known. The set of films was initially exhibited at A.I.R. Gallery in New York City, the first American venue created by women to redress their exclusion from the rampant sexism of the art world. Mendieta, like many artists of her time, was sidelined for spotlighting personal subjects that were visceral, bodily and intimate given the dominance of dispassionate minimal and conceptual art.

She experimented tirelessly with form. Oransky cited Mendieta's 1981 "Esculturas Rupestres" series as a prime example of the complexities of classifying her output any one way. The series included carvings she made in the limestone caves of Escaleras de Jaruco in Cuba, photographs she made of the carvings, an artist book of the photographs, film footage made of the carvings and an edited film

named after the series (which is on view at the Jeu de Paume). Mendieta's grotto sculptures eventually eroded into oblivion; like many of her works, the ensemble lives on only through the artist's films and photographs. At the time, executing the live work was seen as more meaningful; documenting it on film was deemed a mere necessity to capture the ephemeral. Oransky dismissed this as "similar to the hierarchy of placing the aesthetic over the functional" and, through this film-focused exhibition, wishes to give the medium its proper due in her practice. "Is the film documentation? Yes. Is it an artwork unto itself? Yes. Is it both, simultaneously? Yes."

"Terminology itself can be an impediment to our understanding," he said. An artist's creation is often more elaborate and elastic than the discourse around it: "Mendieta referred to herself as a sculptor. She utilized performance, photography and film in her work, but she resisted the labels of performance artist, photographer and filmmaker. Perhaps she was suggesting a different paradigm for sculpture, and we haven't caught up to it yet, a paradigm for sculpture which incorporated all these genres," Oransky said. "Mendieta's work is a

brilliant example of that disruptive engagement."

While she directly confronted the sexism and racism in the art world (and beyond) within the parameters of her work, Mendieta's wider legacy has, more recently, been extrapolated as a symbolic vehicle to question the veneration of some male artists. In particular, exhibitions featuring Mendieta's husband, the minimalist sculptor Carl Andre, have spurred furious activism. Andre was acquitted of charges related to Mendieta's tragic death in 1985. Protesters at a 2017 exhibition of Andre's in Los Angeles handed out postcards with Mendieta's portrait and the probing question *Dónde está Ana Mendieta? (Where is Ana Mendieta?)*

"I understand and I feel the same sense of grief, outrage and injustice that many people feel about her violent and premature death," Oransky said. But he refuses to entangle Mendieta's legacy with anyone else's. "I am not interested in using Mendieta's work as a comeuppance for Carl Andre, or for any other purpose," he said, insisting only that "I am interested in sharing Mendieta's work with others, so they can have the kind of deeply meaningful experiences that I have had with her work."

— SARAH MOROZ