

Ana Mendieta*

(Havana, Cuba, 1948 – New York, 1985)

In Ana Mendieta's work, ancient pre-Columbian rituals and ancestral Afro-Cuban traditions fostered research that was able to apply new directions to the nascent feminist debate as well as to experimentation carried out beyond the confines of the studio, through the expressive possibilities offered by performance and film.

Born in Havana, in the early 1960s, while her father was imprisoned for his opposition to the political regime, the young Ana had to emigrate with her sister Raquelin to the United States. There she pursued her education as an artist. After completing her initial studies and majoring in painting at the University of Iowa, she continued her education there, receiving a Master's degree in a new "Intermedia Program." Conceived by artist Hans Breder, the course was intended to offer participants an innovative conceptual and multidisciplinary approach. Her Cuban roots and early exile as well as her involvement in the most advanced art circles of her time nurtured her fertile and strongly cohesive research, marked by a recurrent nostalgia for origins and a reunification with primary elements such as earth, water, and fire.

In 1971 an archeology seminar in San Juan Teotihuacán in Mexico was an occasion for Mendieta to delve into Latin American culture and to discover connections with an extremely rich historical and spiritual universe that she felt was related to that of her native land. *Burial Pyramid, Yagul, Mexico, 1974*, exemplifies this important phase of her work. In this film, set in an archeological site that contains numerous pre-Columbian tombs, the artist covers her body with stones. Although the action takes place on a naked and defenseless body, rather than an act of macabre violence it seems to suggest a ritual that celebrates the necessity for a return to origins.

In her *Siluetta Series* Mendieta goes even further in her search for an elemental condition where the flesh is completely one with the earth that has generated it. She was repeatedly engaged with this group of works, which began in the summer of 1974, again during a stay in Mexico. Here, the body of the artist is reduced to a rudimentary sign, an ancestral female form that always seems rediscovered in the landscape.

The memory of ancient rituals that emphasize the communion of elements is fundamental to *Untitled (Siluetta di Cohetes) (Silhouette of Fireworks)* and *Siluetta*, works created with fire and gunpowder, continuing a direction the artist embarked on in 1976. *Untitled El Ixchell Negro, 1977*, instead, represents a move closer to pre-Columbian civilization. In this work, the title of which refers to the Mayan goddess of fertility, Mendieta presents her body as that of a mummy, stretched out on the ground and wrapped in black funerary bandages. As in all the artist's work, death and life interweave and feed off each other, in a chain where the transient is sublimated into the eternal and personal memory coincides with archetypal images. (MB)

Additional Works in the Collection

Untitled (Anima, Silueta de Cohetes), 1976, lifetime color photograph, 8 × 10 inches

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