

# THE NEW YORKER

## *Ana Mendieta, the Body Artist*

*Decades after her death, her bold innovations are finally coming into focus.*

By Rebecca Mead (July 12, 2026)



"Blood + Feathers" (1974), one of many pieces in which Mendieta makes use of her body.

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Before Ana Mendieta, the Cuban American artist, became a fellow of the American Academy in Rome, in 1983, she'd never had a studio of her own. Five years earlier, as an ambitious twenty-nine-year-old, she'd moved to New York City in the depths of winter, and soon rented a poky, dark apartment on the ground floor of a building in Greenwich Village. "Desolate" was how she described the place. She scavenged planks of wood for shelves and a table, and she carved out a workspace for herself beneath a loft bed, which had a mattress that she'd dragged in from the street.

The limitations of the space didn't matter so much, though, given the artistic path that Mendieta was forging. She had originally seen herself as a painter, but she'd more or less relinquished the medium by 1972, the year she finished a graduate degree in the subject at the University of Iowa. "My paintings were not real enough for what I wanted the image to convey," she once explained. "And by real I mean I wanted my images to have power, to be magic." Instead of creating conventional canvases or sculptures—works that needed wall or floor space to be made and displayed—Mendieta had developed an artistic practice that might combine performance, land art, and an instrumental use of her own body.

In 1982, Mendieta had staged one such work, “Body Tracks,” at Franklin Furnace, a multidisciplinary venue in what was then the cast-iron wilderness of Tribeca. A small audience assembled in a room where three large blank sheets of paper had been affixed to a wall. On the floor was a basin filled with a viscous liquid, tempera paint mixed with animal blood that was likely procured from a slaughterhouse. Then Mendieta an energetic and diminutive woman, just five feet tall, if that—walked in, to the accompaniment of a drumbeat, dressed in a baggy white ensemble. She drenched her hands and arms in the mixture, reached to the top of one piece of paper, then forcefully smeared her limbs down the surface to make two bloody tracks, ending up on her knees on the floor. Mendieta performed this action twice more before absenting herself, leaving the audience to contemplate the visceral imprints she left behind.



One of the “Rupestrian Sculptures,” made in the early eighties, in which Mendieta carved figures into the walls of limestone grottoes in Cuba. Artwork © Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC. Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery

In Rome, however, Mendieta had space and light, and—with a studio perched over the academy’s lovely, pine-filled gardens atop the Janiculum Hill—immediate access to the natural world. She could also enjoy new urban pleasures: she screeched around the city in a Volkswagen while yelling through her rolled-down window in demotic Italian; as a native Spanish speaker, the language came easily to her. Friends observed that Mendieta—who had been born in Cuba but, at the age of twelve, was sent to live in exile in the United States—had found in Rome a warm, sociable culture that was reassuringly familiar. Mendieta was vivacious, fast-talking, intense; she got into arguments and very loudly held her ground. In Italy, she could be like this without being stereotyped as a hotheaded Latina, as she often had been in America.

Her experience in Rome was so liberating that her artistic practice opened up, too. Mendieta enlisted a gardener at the academy to help her haul a fallen plane tree into her studio. She obtained other trees, then stripped their bark and burned abstracted silhouettes of human figures into the exposed grain, using gunpowder that she kept stashed in a cookie tin. Ida Panicelli, a curator who got to know Mendieta in Rome, and who would go on to serve as the editor of *Artforum* in the late eighties and early nineties, recalled recently, “She could finally produce things. Her work was so ephemeral before.”

Four forms that Mendieta made from those tree trunks in Rome make up a freestanding work that's catalogued as "La Jungla (Totem Grove)." The series will be on display, starting this summer, at the Tate Modern, in London, as part of a wide-ranging exhibition of the artist's work. The show, one of several recent and forthcoming exhibitions dedicated to Mendieta's oeuvre, will also include some of the works for which she is best known, from her years-long "Silueta Series." In these pieces, made between 1973 and 1980, Mendieta used the measurements or the outline of her body to mark the ground, or placed herself in juxtaposition with trees, flowers, and other aspects of the natural world. These "earth-body" works, as she often called them, were documented in photographs or on film. Among them is perhaps Mendieta's most recognizable work, "Imágen de Yágul," a color photograph that she made in Oaxaca, Mexico, in 1973. In the image, she poses nude within the rocky interior of an ancient Mesoamerican tomb, with sprays of white blossoms rising from between her legs and sandwiched between her arms and her torso, her face hidden by the flowers. The vitality of her body is apparent even as she lies still in a space built for burial; her hands are poised on her hips, and her feet appear to be raised, hovering slightly above the dark shadow of the earth.

Mendieta's name recognition, at least to the broad museumgoing public, is not comparable to that of, say, Frida Kahlo or Tracey Emin, both of whom have also been celebrated with Tate shows this year. But Mendieta's art has been increasingly embraced in recent years, especially by young women, who recognize her as a kind of contemporary, even if her work was made half a century ago. Katy Hessel, the author of "The Story of Art Without Men," a female-centered survey, calls Mendieta "one of the most important artists of the twentieth century." The essayist and critic Olivia Laing, in her book "Everybody," from 2021, places Mendieta in the context of the second-wave feminism of Andrea Dworkin, who wrote with incendiary fury about the violence of men toward women, and of Angela Carter, whose novels and short stories vividly reinterpreted myths and fairy tales with a feminine awareness of erotic danger. Mendieta's work, Laing writes, suggests "the certainty of destruction, and the certainty too of abiding, resisting." Laing also observed that Mendieta "used violent material in ways that feel full of liberating possibility, but that doesn't mean she herself was out of harm's way."

The certainty of destruction was an essential dimension of Mendieta's art. The outline of a body that Mendieta stamped into river mud would inevitably be eroded by weather and water; the feathers that she stuck to her skin could disperse as she ran naked along a beach. Like all art that incorporates elements of performance and temporality, Mendieta's is not always easy to access or appreciate, and the films she made documenting her work—the digitization of which has been painstakingly overseen by her niece Raquel Cecilia Mendieta, who now heads the Ana Mendieta estate—can't fully capture the moments of execution. There are few artists whose pieces more keenly make a viewer wish that aroma could be conveyed by digital reproduction: the vegetal scent of mud, the heady perfume of flowers, the iron reek of blood. Much of Mendieta's work has a striking visual effect at its core: in "Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints)," a series from the early seventies, photographs capture her through a sheet of glass onto which she has pressed her face and body, smearing her nose or cheek or mouth into a distorted fleshy mass—a gesture that the British artist Jenny Saville would echo some twenty years later, in her collaborations with the photographer Glen Luchford. Other Mendieta works are more private, even secretive, including the "Ruprestrian Sculptures," made in the early eighties, in which Mendieta carved figures into the walls of limestone grottoes in Cuba. Mendieta was active at a time when female artists, especially female artists of color, had so much less currency than their male counterparts that being

overlooked, however much it was resented, offered its own kind of freedom. It's impossible to view Mendieta's output and not think about the physical stamina and cultural daring that she must have had—not only to make art from her exposed body but also to hide herself away and make work that might only ever please or satisfy herself.

The Tate Modern show will be arranged thematically, with each of the sections representing a facet of the natural world explored in Mendieta's work. The first section, called the Cave, is based on pieces made in those grottoes in Cuba, and features what might be called neo-Neolithic images—figures resembling fertility goddesses. Other sections are named the Grove, the River, the Sacred Grounds. The museum also plans to re-stage some of Mendieta's ephemeral works. Staffers at the Tate Modern have been growing a crop of sphagnum moss in order to re-create a living sculpture of wire mesh and climbing plants. The piece, called "Árbol de la Vida / Mother of All Things," will be assembled against a tree outside the building. (These works will be executed in part by Raquel Cecilia Mendieta, who will reconstruct them from images in cases when the artist left no written instructions.) The curators have also selected several paintings that Mendieta worked on as a student; museumgoers can assess the presence or absence of magic in them. Valentine Umansky, one of the show's curators, explained to me, "It's not really organized in a way that follows the axis of her life, because, in a way, all the themes loop."

The thematic presentation helps underscore the idea that Mendieta's work prefigured the environmental concerns that have lately become widespread among artists. (As the critic Ben Davis recently noted, this year's Venice Biennale includes "unbelievable amounts of work about plants, and water, and farming.") Umansky suggested that younger audiences may find in Mendieta's art an exploration of the malleability of identity. She was playing with the concept of gender as early as 1972. That year, in "Untitled (Facial Hair Transplants)," which was preserved in a series of photographs, Mendieta and a friend, the poet Morty Sklar, stood side by side in front of a mirror; as Sklar shaved his beard off, he handed clumps of hair to Mendieta, who applied them to her own face with glue, resulting in a realistic if unruly chin-strap. Umansky told me that by the final section of the show, called the Threshold, a visitor should have a sense of Mendieta as an artist of transformation: "transforming into a dog, transforming into a tree, transforming into a bird, transforming by changing genders, transforming her face—with this idea of this energy or life force that allows this transformation, from death to rebirth, and also from one state to another, one element to another." Umansky went on, "The show really ends with this idea, which is also something that I think contemporary audiences can resonate to: We can reinvent ourselves. Nothing ends. We constantly transform. And all that we touch changes us."

Mendieta's first transformation was forced upon her, when she was on the cusp of adolescence. Although in New York City she lived the frugal existence of an impoverished artist—she paid her rent, in part, by working as a waitress at Food, the artists' canteen in SoHo—she was born, in 1948, into Cuba's social and economic elite. One of her great-grandfathers, Carlos María de Rojas, had been a hero of the 1895 War of Independence, and a great-uncle, Carlos Mendieta, had briefly served as President of Cuba, in the nineteen-thirties. Her father, Ignacio Mendieta, was a prominent lawyer, and her mother, Raquel, was a chemistry teacher. Ana and her sister, Raquelín, who was two years older, grew up with servants at the family's homes, in Havana and on seaside properties outside the city.



"Untitled (Facial Hair Transplants)," from 1972, is one of several works by Mendieta that play with the concept of gender.  
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This privileged childhood was ruptured in 1961, a year after the Cuban Revolution ended. Mendieta's father, who was part of a group that had helped the C.I.A. work against the rise of Fidel Castro, became concerned for his and his family's safety, and Raquelín and Ana were among some fourteen thousand Cuban children who were sent to the United States as part of a program known as Operation Peter Pan. (Ignacio's fears were justified: he was imprisoned by the Castro regime, and wasn't released until the late seventies.) The sisters spent several weeks in a refugee camp in Florida, and were then dispatched to an orphanage in Dubuque, Iowa. Locals became their foster parents, treating them with differing degrees of kindness. "I don't care who you were in Cuba—you're nobody in this country!" one foster parent reportedly told them. It would be five years before the sisters were reunited with their mother and their younger brother, after they also relocated to the U.S.

Despite receiving no encouragement from her high-school art teacher, who failed to identify any talent in her first sculptures, Mendieta enrolled at the University of Iowa to study art. After graduating, she enrolled in a master's program at Iowa and taught art at an elementary school. Her practice eventually grew more experimental under the influence of a professor named Hans Breder, who also became her romantic partner for several years. Breder had founded an interdisciplinary "Intermedia" program at the university; in a statement from 1971, he and two other artists encouraged others to see art "as an indispensable force in the life of any human culture, away from the inanimate investment hanging on the wall or trickling out of the background stereo." Breder, who was thirteen years Mendieta's senior, was well connected in avant-garde circles, and he invited some of his forward thinking friends to visit Iowa. One was Vito Acconci, whose work included "Following Piece," in which he surreptitiously trailed pedestrians around New York City.

Mendieta began staging her own site-specific projects, including several works that refer powerfully to sexual violence. In one work, made in response to the brutal assault and murder of another female student, she went into her apartment and stripped from the waist down, smeared herself in animal blood, and bent over a table, leaving her door ajar so that others could enter and confront the scene of an imagined crime. For “Moffitt Building Piece,” Mendieta poured blood on the sidewalk outside an apartment building so that it seeped to the edge of a surrounding paving stone, forming a crimson puddle. Mendieta then documented the reactions of passersby—a parade of the oblivious and the curious, with none trying to intervene in the grisly scene.

There is a confrontational anger in these works. Mendieta described one such piece as a “reaction against the idea of violence against women,” and feminist critics later came to regard them as prescient commentaries on the vulnerability of women’s bodies. (She was not the only female artist in the nineteen-seventies to address the issue of rape, a subject that art has traditionally stylized more than condemned; in 1977, Suzanne Lacy presented a three-week-long performance piece in Los Angeles in which she stamped reported rapes on a map each day.) During this formative period, blood became one of Mendieta’s primary media. “Sweating Blood,” which was recorded with a Super 8 camera, shows Mendieta’s face in closeup. She is radiant, which makes it all the more disturbing when syrupy rivulets start trickling down her unblemished, dispassionate visage. The result is a self portrait suggestive of images of Christ and of saintly relics—central motifs in Catholicism, the religion in which Mendieta was raised. The ways Mendieta used blood were various, and not always straightforwardly suggestive of harm. She had grown up around members of her family’s household staff who followed the sacrificial rituals of Santería, the Afro-Cuban religion that combines elements of Catholicism with Yoruba practices, in which blood is regarded as a sacred force. In 1972, Mendieta alluded to such practices in “Chicken Movie, Chicken Piece,” for which she stood naked holding a decapitated fowl, her body spattered with its blood.

Mendieta found her most potent theme by representing the female body not as a site of violence but in states of ecstatic fusion with nature. Breder once gave an account of an early gesture by Mendieta in this direction. One afternoon, she and several other graduate students gathered outside his studio. “The smell of freshly cut grass is hanging in the air,” he wrote. “Spontaneously, Mendieta undresses, lies on the lawn, and asks one of the students to cover her body with grass so that it blends into the ground.”

Mendieta began documenting herself lying in streambeds and reclining on rocks. She stood against the trunk of a tree after slathering herself in lumpy mud, so that her body merged visually with the gnarled bark. Such works were often physically demanding to make, but resulted in sublimely beautiful effects. In “Grass Breathing,” from around 1975, she hid herself almost seamlessly beneath a layer of sod on a verdant lawn, causing the ground to rise and fall with the rhythm of her respiration. As her explorations progressed, Mendieta’s process became less literal, and she sometimes used a body-size cutout to stamp her form into the earth. By the time she was working with the tree trunks from Italy, her representation of the human body had been reduced to an abstraction of shapes and geometries. A viewer might not even recognize the form as human.

The show at the Tate Modern also emphasizes another of Mendieta’s consistent themes: the sorrow of being exiled from her homeland. She depicted her separation from Cuba not as an abstract loss but as

an excruciating physical tear. “I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast out from the womb,” she once said. She viewed her art as “the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the Universe.”

Above all, the thematic approach of the Tate Modern exhibition resists the dark pull exerted by Mendieta’s biography. Placing the tree trunks scorched with gunpowder in the second gallery allows them to be enjoyed without the freight of knowing what happened to the artist soon after her return to New York from Rome. The burned trunks, as it turned out, were the last major works Mendieta produced before her sudden, violent death.

Late in the summer of 1985, Mendieta began packing up her studio at the American Academy, readying the space for its next resident. But she intended to stay in Rome, in an apartment in a residential neighborhood not far from the Forum. The place had been rented by her husband of a few months, the minimalist American sculptor Carl Andre, who had been shuttling between Berlin and New York for much of the period that Mendieta was in Italy.

Andre was among the preëminent artists of his generation. His groundbreaking work with industrial materials, including bricks and timber arranged into geometric forms, thrilled critics despite sometimes baffling the uninitiated. The dynamic between Andre and Mendieta was charged and often fractious. Friends remarked on their tendency to argue, particularly under the influence of alcohol. In the introduction to a 2011 book about Mendieta, the critic Lucy Lippard, a friend of both artists, wrote, “Her volatile alliance with Carl Andre, an old friend and political comrade of mine, was surprising, but what the hell, it seemed to work.” Their wedding, held in Rome, had been a gesture of romance and optimism. And they had a fruitful aesthetic dialogue, evident in a collaboration on a limited-edition book of twenty lithographs, half of which featured images of leaves, made by Mendieta, and the other half outlines of rocks, made by Andre. But none of this could mask an underlying distrust— among other things, Mendieta believed that Andre, who had been married twice before, was serially unfaithful.

Before Mendieta could fully settle into the new apartment in Rome, she had to fly back to New York City to take care of some business. Andre would be there, too. About a week after she flew to America, in the early hours of September 8th, she plummeted to her death from a window of Andre’s apartment, on the thirty-fourth floor of a high-rise on Mercer Street, in Greenwich Village. Andre, who was also at the apartment, was charged with her murder. Nearly two and a half years later, he was acquitted.

There will undoubtedly be museumgoers at the Tate Modern whose introduction to the artist was not through her work but through a retelling of the circumstances of her death. At the time, the details were voyeuristically chronicled by the press. In December, 1985, *New York* ran the headline “Did Carl Andre, the Renowned Minimalist Sculptor, Hurl His Wife, a Fellow Artist, to Her Death?” The magazine’s cover featured a large portrait of Andre alongside a small snapshot of Mendieta. She went unnamed.

In 1990, the journalist Robert Katz published “Naked by the Window,” a comprehensive account of the trial, which he had attended. Andre’s lawyer, Jack S. Hoffinger, had declared that the artist would take the surprising path of forgoing a jury in favor of a bench trial, in which the judge alone makes a ruling, and argued that Mendieta’s death had been either an accident or a “subintentional suicide” under the

influence of alcohol. Mendieta's friends and family thought it was preposterous to paint her as suicidal, given the many plans she had made for the future. Mendieta had even told intimates that she was gathering documentary evidence of Andre's infidelity in advance of demanding a divorce, but, to their dismay, that information was ruled hearsay, and thus could not be admitted. The forensic evidence was murky, although a doorman told the police that he'd heard someone shouting "No!" and "Don't!" "Naked by the Window"—the title is derived from an early poem by Andre—has a floridity influenced by Truman Capote. In a passage attributed in an annotation to an interview that the author conducted with the judge, Alvin Schlesinger, Katz suggests that Schlesinger was ambivalent about his not-guilty verdict: "Odd sort of person, Carl. He probably did it. Fifteen years was the least he would have to serve, if found guilty. Interesting case. Very close call."

"Naked by the Window" is out of print, but the elevation of Mendieta's posthumous reputation has given it renewed currency. The book is being adapted by the actress America Ferrera for a TV series, in which Ferrera will star. The ceaseless appetite for true-crime narratives has also driven interest in Mendieta, and "Naked by the Window" informed a 2022 season of the podcast "Death of an Artist," in which Helen Molesworth, a former curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, considered the life and work of both Mendieta and Andre. The podcast, which drew on Katz's recorded interviews, was thoughtful and respectful, with due consideration given by Molesworth to Mendieta's artistic career. At the same time, it fit the parameters of the true-crime genre, with Molesworth and her producer, Maria Luisa Tucker, trying to corner Andre at the apartment building on Mercer Street, where he continued to live for decades after Mendieta's death. Molesworth's discomfort is palpable: "Apparently, when journalists hit brick walls with e-mail and phone messages, they do something called doorstepping, which is when you literally just show up at someone's doorstep. Needless to say, they don't teach this technique in art-history class." (Molesworth never managed to speak with Andre, who died in 2024.)

Mendieta's story has repeatedly been told outside the confines of galleries and museums. In a graphic novel by Christine Redfern and Caro Caron, "Who Is Ana Mendieta?," published in 2011, the artist's lifeless body is shown crumpled on the roof of a deli beneath Andre's apartment. A caption notes, "Eerie echo of a 1973 'Silueta.' " A 2024 novel by Xochitl Gonzalez, "Anita de Monte Laughs Last," which lightly fictionalizes Mendieta's story, is also set for a screen adaptation, to be directed by Eva Longoria.

Mendieta's life and legacy have been chronicled in several documentary shorts made by Raquel Cecilia Mendieta, who is at work on a feature-length documentary that will, she hopes, provide a counternarrative to unauthorized treatments. "I would like to tell her story holistically and honestly," she told me. She has also written a script for a filmed dramatization of Mendieta's life. "It's from her point of view—she is telling us her story, so it's all through her eyes, like a memory," she said. Raquel explained that her ambition is to present Mendieta's work the way the artist would have wanted it to be seen—which includes not dwelling on the circumstances of her death. "That's a second of her life, right?" Raquel said. "It's a blip. She shouldn't be defined by something that happened to her. She should be defined by what she did."

Although the Tate Modern exhibition will focus on Mendieta's art, Andre will be named, and the show will include a copy of "Pietre Foglie," the leaf-and-stone lithograph book the couple collaborated on.

Umansky, the curator, explained that it demonstrates a creative tension between the two artists. “There are the very organic and rounded shapes of Ana, versus the very squarish shapes of Carl, and it says so much about the artistic and intellectual fights that they had, and how this confrontation is interesting,” she said. “Ana clearly stood up to him throughout their relationship.” An effective retrospective, Umansky went on, necessarily includes an account of the artist’s life and practice, “and everything that feeds into it is legitimate.”

Is it ever possible to separate an appreciation of an artist’s work from the facts of his or her life? This question has been much debated in recent years, particularly in the wake of the #MeToo movement, during which many revered artists were exposed as, at the very least, deeply problematic men. One of Molesworth’s questions in her podcast was whether, after delving into Mendieta’s death, she could continue to admire Andre’s work. She concluded that, in her capacity as a museum curator, she could no longer bring herself to display it. But that didn’t mean she wanted to erase Andre, and she could still acknowledge his importance in art history. Spending time thinking about Mendieta and Andre “helped me realize that I wanted to be a member of a community that discusses grave and difficult things,” Molesworth said in her concluding episode. “It’s clear that our geniuses can do horrible things. It’s clear that talent and violence can exist in the same person.”



“Silueta Sangrienta,” from 1975

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In the case of Mendieta, the question is a slightly different one: Is it possible to separate an appreciation of her work from the brutal spectacle of her death? This is particularly charged by the fact that, during the trial, Andre’s lawyer defended his client by trivializing Mendieta’s art, characterizing her creative themes as mere symptoms of a ghoulish obsession with death. In an outrageous line of questioning, documented by Katz, Hoffinger quizzed one witness about the theatrical aspect of Mendieta’s work, implying that, consciously or not, the artist’s demise was just another performance: “Do you know the art where she used her own body to make impressions on the ground? . . . And the work with blood running down her face? . . . Was Ana interested in the wedding of the human body with the earth?” Mendieta once told an interviewer that her interest in making impressions of her body on earth could be traced to her Cuban childhood, where she learned to crawl and walk on coastal sand. It would have served Andre’s lawyer less well to suggest that what inspired Mendieta’s practice was, quite literally, a day at the beach.

Given this historical context—and given how the tragic early deaths of female artists, from Sylvia Plath to Francesca Woodman to Marilyn Monroe to Amy Winehouse, are often framed in ways that diminish their accomplishments—it’s understandable that the custodians of Mendieta’s legacy have sought to discourage readings of her work that begin with her life’s end. Months in advance of the Tate Modern show, the Mendieta estate issued a preëemptive strike, in the form of a document titled “fact sheet.” It stated, “Ana Mendieta’s death does not define her, or her art. Her tragic death is often used as a means for sensationalism and clickbait, but it is not remotely related to how she created her art, nor was her art predestined or shaped by her death in any way, shape or form.” In this document, you can sense an anticipatory weariness at the inevitable regurgitation of gory details. In an interview two years ago with the *Times*, Raquel Cecilia Mendieta asked, “How many times does she have to fall?”

Even among those who cherish Mendieta’s art, there has been a tendency to present her as an emblem of the way women are abused by men—an approach that results in a similar foregrounding of the circumstances of her death. In the past dozen years, museum shows featuring Andre’s work at Dia Beacon, at MOCA, and at the Tate Modern have drawn protesters holding posters reading “Where is Ana Mendieta?” The implication is that the ongoing veneration of Andre’s art is an example of the establishment’s unregenerate prioritizing of the male and the white over the female and the brown. (Although Andre continued to have a successful career after the trial, his reputation was indelibly marked by it; when he died, the first line of his *Times* obituary referred to “the accusation that he played a role in the death” of Mendieta.)



“Imágen de Yágul,” from 1973. In this celebrated work, Mendieta ties herself to the ancients and to history — to the living and the dead, to death and rebirth, to the common fate of every body. Artwork © Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC.  
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For some admirers of Mendieta, such a framing characterizes her foremost as Andre's victim. Coco Fusco, a Cuban American artist twelve years Mendieta's junior, told me, "I am of the belief that he probably did throw her out the window, but at the same time I don't think there's anything to be gained in terms of understanding her work by making that the most important thing to talk about." Fusco prefers to focus on, say, the links Mendieta forged between American and Cuban artists once she started returning to her homeland, in the early eighties, or the urgent ways in which Mendieta drew upon Afro-Cuban syncretic faiths to express herself. "I think it's more relevant to think about it in terms of the relationship to her life experience, which was very traumatic in many ways, and in some ways emblematic," Fusco said.

Of course, artists and their estates can't control how a body of work will be received by viewers. And it would not serve Mendieta's art to avert the critical gaze entirely from the ways her work does tackle the subject of death. After all, she did stage a fake murder, lie in a tomb, and repeatedly douse her body in blood. Throughout her lifetime, her work was seen as a meditation on violence, especially against women, and it would likely have continued to be seen that way even if Mendieta had lived a long life with a peaceful end. The enduring attraction of "Body Tracks" lies in its suggestive openness to multiple interpretations. The work can be read as a commentary on the act of mark-making. It is equally reasonable for a viewer to look at the stains of blood dragged down the wall and shudder at what the work says about the frailty of the human body and its subjection to the irresistible force of gravity. "Imágen de Yágul," the work in which Mendieta inserted her own body into a tomb and decked herself with flowers, was explicitly a way for the artist to tie herself to the ancients and to history—to the living and the dead, to death and rebirth, to the common fate of everybody. Mortality was among Mendieta's subjects, just as water, fire, earth, and air were among her materials.

"I don't think that you can separate death and life," Mendieta told Linda Montano, an American performance artist, in an interview published in the late eighties. "All of my work is about those two things—it's about Eros and life and death." Following Mendieta's demise, Ida Panicelli, her curator friend in Rome, went to her studio at the American Academy to assess Mendieta's belongings. Amid packed boxes, she found an experiment under way, in which Mendieta had encased part of a prickly-pear cactus in wax. The encasement was humid, and a single bud had pushed its way through the waxen tomb and into the light of the studio. "I said, 'My God, she's here,' " Panicelli told me. "It was like feeling her presence— still there, nurturing a sculpture." Like the best of Mendieta's tragically truncated body of work, this unfinished piece had a fragility and an ephemerality, as well as a resilient fortitude. Panicelli added, "It was something very close to death in the work, and incredibly close to life."