



1. *Untitled*. 1984. Incised leaf, 6 x 3 1/2" (15.2 x 8.9 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchased with funds provided by Agnes Gund and Daniel Shapiro

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Ana Mendieta's work reflects a constant negotiation of physical and political boundaries—those of the outdoor, natural world versus the interior of her studio, and those of the feminist movement versus the mainstream art world.¹

Best known for her works executed in the wild, in the 1980s Mendieta turned to more traditional forms—to sculpture and drawing—but chose materials that maintained a connection with the natural world. Her political alliances also shifted over the course of her career: she actively pursued a role in the New York feminist community, joining the women's cooperative gallery Artists in Residence (AIR) in 1978, but by 1980 she had concluded that "American Feminism as it stands is basically a white middle class movement" and was therefore too limited a lens through which to consider her work.² Nonetheless, her work continued to make references, through her use of ancient goddess forms, to the female body and its historical spiritual significance. Mendieta's reshaping of both her artistic practice and the context in which she presented it reflected an acute awareness of artificial divisions between formal categories—between earthworks and traditional sculpture and drawing, feminist art and politically neutral works—and her struggle against the limited readings such divisions encouraged.

In 1973 Mendieta began marking the natural landscape with the shape of her own petite body and documenting these interventions in photographs and film. These works, the *Siluetas* (1973–80), were carved,

sculpted, and outlined in the earth using flowers, fire, and an extraordinary range of organic materials, all but ensuring an ephemeral existence and ultimate disappearance. These earth-body works (as the artist referred to them) are often grouped with avant-garde practices popular during the 1960s and '70s, including performance and earthworks, but Mendieta resisted these and other categories; Olga Viso, who organized a retrospective of Mendieta's work in 2004, noted that the artist "ultimately saw her work as separate and distinct from the tradition of performance and more akin to a notion of 'living sculpture.'"³ Although documentation allowed the artist's *Siluetas* to reach an audience, she encouraged an open reading of the work's genre, suggesting it was ultimately both "body earthwork and photo."⁴

This refusal to segregate the *Siluetas* into neat art-historical categories reflects a fluidity of thinking and perhaps indicates connections between the earth-body works and her more traditional pieces of the 1980s. Searching for a way to make her work more permanent, but without losing the natural and universal quality of her ephemeral *Siluetas*, Mendieta began making flat floor sculptures, which were combinations of various organic matter and binders shaped into female forms, many of them iconic goddess symbols employed by ancient cultures. Made of sand, earth, and other natural materials, works like *Nile Born* (1984, no. 3) can be read as indoor *Siluetas*, albeit more lasting (and more marketable) versions suitable for traditional gallery environments.⁵ Many of

the floor sculptures may contain earth from locations of personal or historical significance to the artist; the abstract female form of *Nile Born* probably contains grains of sand from the famed river in Egypt, while other works may include earth from Cuba, Mendieta's birthplace.⁶

In tandem with the floor sculptures, Mendieta also began making formal drawings that were distinct from the sketches and notes she habitually made as plans for and documentation of her other work. Images of the studio she occupied during a one-year residency at the American Academy in Rome in 1983–84 show the walls covered with drawings, many echoing the female forms of her floor sculptures.⁷ The fluid lines and smeared ink of some of these drawings suggest that Mendieta extended to her work on paper the combination of careful planning and acceptance of chance and accident that characterized her work in nature. In 1981 she began a series of drawings on amate paper, which she called Amategrams (no. 2). Traditionally made from the bark of fig trees by the Otomí, an indigenous people of Mexico, amate paper has been made since pre-Columbian times; Otomí shamans cut various shapes and figures—often, like Mendieta's *Siluetas*, with their arms upraised in an iconic goddess pose—from amate paper for use in religious rituals, with different-colored papers used toward different ends.⁸ Mendieta also drew on fresh leaves (no. 1), using various tools to scrape, puncture, outline, and burn her signature female figure into the surface, using the veins of the leaf as other artists might use the lines on graph paper.⁹ As the leaves dried and yellowed, the marks changed as well, in an intimate but surprisingly durable version of her earth-body works. Mendieta saw her choice of



2. *Untitled (Amategram)*.
c. 1982–83. Synthetic polymer
paint on amate paper, 15 7/8 x
11 7/8" (40.3 x 30.2 cm). The
Museum of Modern Art, New
York. Committee on Drawings
Funds



3. *Nile Born*. 1984.
Sand and binder on wood,
2 3/4 x 61 1/2 x 19 1/4"
(7 x 156.2 x 48.9 cm).
The Museum of Modern Art,
New York. Gift of Agnes Gund

natural and historically significant materials as a continuation of the "obsessive act of reasserting my ties with the earth," even if this act was not performed directly in nature.¹⁰

Mendieta's shift to a more traditional studio practice in the 1980s should not be read as a break with her earlier work in the landscape; on the contrary, her efforts to maintain a link with nature, reflected in her choice of medium, suggest an intentional blurring of boundaries between art forms and a resistance to dividing up a cohesive body of work. Nor did her increasing resistance to formalized feminism

during this same period indicate a change in artistic themes or goals: her use of the female body, personal experience, and ancient female archetypes as subjects remained the same. In distancing herself from a feminist context, she was reacting to an increasingly simplified reading of her work. Feminist thought today, having evolved to embrace a broader and more complex range of cultural practices and experiences, is a field that Mendieta would have perhaps found more accommodating.

1. On the way Ana Mendieta's work destabilizes physical and political borders, see Irit Rogoff, "Borders," in *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 112–43.
2. Mendieta, quoted in Olga Viso, *Ana Mendieta: Earth Body: Sculpture and Performance, 1972–1985* (Washington D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden; Ostfildern-

Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2004), p. 73. Mendieta resigned from AIR in 1982.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 69. See also Viso on situating Mendieta's work in the art movements of her time, including feminism, in *ibid.*, pp. 68–76.
4. Mendieta, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 70.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 104–12.
6. Mendieta's addition of materials from specific locations is

suggested by statements she made at the time and by her titling of the works but cannot be absolutely confirmed. See *ibid.*, p. 118 n. 307.
7. See the photograph of Mendieta's Rome studio, in Laura Roulet, "Ana Mendieta: A Life in Context," in *ibid.*, p. 238.
8. On the history and use of amate paper, see Bodil Christensen and Samuel Marti, *Witchcraft and Pre-Columbian*

Paper (Mexico City: Ediciones Euroamericanas, 1971), n.p.; and Lilian A. Bell, *Papyrus, Tapa, Amate and Rice Paper: Papermaking in Africa, The Pacific, Latin America and Southeast Asia* (McMinnville, Ore.: Liliaceae Press, 1985), n.p.
9. On Mendieta's leaf-drawing technique, see Viso, *Ana Mendieta*, pp. 108–9.
10. Mendieta, unpublished statement, 1981; quoted in

John Perreault, "Earth and Fire: Mendieta's Body of Work," in Perreault and Petra Barreras del Rio, *Ana Mendieta: A Retrospective* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1987), p. 10. Mendieta's interest in primitive cultures was greatly enhanced by her experiences in Mexico; on these experiences and their influence on her work, see Viso, *Ana Mendieta*, pp. 45–61.