

Ana Mendieta's Land-body works

Teacher's Introduction

About this Resource

This lesson series is designed to connect students with primary source texts that offer opportunities for critical thinking and interdisciplinary connections with works in the Nasher collection. We suggest students first read the primary source text before completing a related project proposal for their own unique artwork. **The information on this page is provided to offer teachers a broader context to guide student discussion. The following pages may be printed and given directly to students.**



Ana Mendieta *Untitled*, 1985.
Wood and gunpowder.

About Ana Mendieta

Born in Havana, Cuba to a politically distinguished family, Mendieta was a young witness to the Cuban Revolution of 1959 when Fidel Castro overthrew the Batista government. In 1961, Mendieta's parents decided to send their daughters to the United States to avoid their children's indoctrination in Communist ideology. At the age of 12, Mendieta and her two sisters were sent to live in Dubuque, Iowa by way of Miami. This experience was understandably jarring for Mendieta and her two sisters, and left an indelible impression on the artist, who would go on to make work in response to her feelings of exile, absence, identity, and the earth and its associations to the motherland. Mendieta studied painting and intermedia arts under Hans Breder at the University of Iowa. Through Breder's encouragement, she moved away from painting into the more performative mode of working for which she is known today.

Ana Mendieta's Work

In a career that spanned just over a decade, Mendieta produced a remarkable body of work that included ephemeral outdoor performances and creations documented in photographs, 35mm slides and Super 8 films, as well as sculpture and drawing, before her untimely death in 1985 at the age of 36. Rooted in nature and the body, Mendieta's art fused both, and her legacy paved the way for artists of subsequent generations to create works involving identity politics, feminism and performance.

Additional Resources

Works by Ana Mendieta in the Nasher collection (Nasher Magazine Summer 2017, page 20)

www.nashersculpturecenter.org/pages/nasher-magazine/magazine?id=43

Video: Ana Mendieta at Gallery Lelong

www.youtube.com/watch?v=KbYFjJomZag

Suggested Curriculum Connections (TEKS)

Fine Arts: Knowledge and Skills | §117.302. Art, Level I (b) (4)

Fine Arts: Critical Evaluation | §117.52. Art, Level I (c) (3) and (4)

Social Studies: United States History Studies | §113.41. Culture, (25) (A)

English Language Arts and Reading | §110.31. English I, (26)

Learn More at the Nasher

You can learn more about Ana Mendieta's works and see what's currently on view by visiting the "Art" section of the Nasher website. Discover more resources and lessons in the "Learn" section, or book a guided or self-guided tour in the "Visit" section. www.nashersculpturecenter.org

Context: Works by Ana Mendieta in the Nasher Collection

Silueta Sangrienta

Mendieta's 1975 film *Silueta Sangrienta* (which translates to "bleeding silhouette") represents a transitional moment in her *Silueta* series, as the artist's body is both present and absent throughout the short silent film. Made in Iowa City, Iowa in 1975, it documents a variety of the artist's actions and both the presence and absence of her body. *Silueta Sangrienta* is considered by some scholars to be part of a suite of four films classified as "actions" within the *Silueta* series, as they go beyond simple documentation of Mendieta's creation of the silhouette form to represent a series of actions carried out by the artist throughout the time-based work.



ABOVE: Ana Mendieta *Silueta Sangrienta* (*Bleeding Silhouette*), 1975. Super-8mm film transferred to high-definition digital media, color, silent. Running time: 1:51 minutes.

Untitled

Untitled is one of a group of six wooden slab sculptures the artist made while living in Rome in the final year of her life. Through the burning of gun powder, Mendieta imprinted a female form onto the surface of the tree trunk. The result is a powerful totemic sculpture that subtly references many of the key aspects of her previous work: performance, the female form, gun powder (a commonly used material in her art), and the connection to nature.



LEFT: Ana Mendieta *Untitled*, 1985. Wood and gunpowder.

Untitled (Maroya)

The pair of photographs entitled *Untitled (Maroya)* of 1982 relate to later works from Mendieta's *Silueta* series with the repetition of the figure upon the landscape and the absence of the artist's body within the image. Between the two photographs, Mendieta has captured the action or making of the work (igniting a form shaped in gun powder) and the resulting ephemeral silhouette (the cavity of the burnt-out gunpowder on the earth). The title of the photographs comes from indigenous Caribbean mythology—Maroya represents the Moon Spirit and was considered by the Taíno (Amerindian culture indigenous to Cuba and the Greater Antilles) to be the link between Divine Woman and human women. Made during a visit to Cuba in the early 1980s, these photographs represent Mendieta's continuation of the *Silueta* theme in her work, as well as a symbolic return to her homeland as referenced in the title taken from indigenous Cuban culture. Though photographs, the two objects are sculptural in their making, with Mendieta creating the works through the physical gestures of carving and mark-making directly on the earth.



BELOW LEFT: Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Maroya)*, 1985 Lifetime black and white photograph, 10x8 in. (25.4 x 20.3 cm.) BELOW RIGHT: *Untitled (Maroya)*, 1982 Lifetime black and white photograph, 10x8 in. (25.4 x 20.3 cm.)

Read

Artists write statements to describe their work and their interests. Read Mendieta's statements below to better understand her aims:

"The first part of my life was spent in Cuba, where a mixture of Spanish and African culture makes up the heritage of the people. The Roman Catholic Church and "Santeria"—a cult of the African divinities represented with the Catholic saints and magical powers—are the prevalent religions of the nation.

It is perhaps during my childhood in Cuba that I first became fascinated by primitive art cultures. It seems as if these cultures are provided with an inner knowledge, a closeness to natural resources. And it is this knowledge which gives reality to the images they have created.

It is this sense of magic, knowledge, and power, found in primitive art, that influences my personal attitude to art-making. For the past five years I have been working out in nature, exploring the relationship between myself, the earth, and art. Using my body as a reference in the creation of the works, I am able to transcend myself in a voluntary submersion and total identification with nature. Through my art, I want to express the immediacy of life and the eternity of nature." ~AM 1978

"For the last twelve years I have been carrying on a dialogue between the landscape and the female body. Having been torn from my homeland (Cuba) during my adolescence, I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast out from the womb (Nature).

My art is the way I reestablish the bonds that unite me to the Universe. It is a return to the maternal source.

These obsessive acts of reasserting my ties with the earth are really a manifestation of my thirst for being. In essence my works are the reactivation of primeval beliefs at work within the human psyche." ~AM, 1983

Excerpts from "Unseen Mendieta: The Unpublished Works of Ana Mendieta" *Olga Viso, 2008*



LEFT: Ana Mendieta, *Untitled*, c. 1983-5. wash on paper, 13x81/8.

RIGHT: Ana Mendieta, Documentation of artist's maquette, possibly for *La Maja de Yerba*, c. 1984.

Create an Artwork Proposal

Mendieta's university professor and mentor, Hans Breder, encouraged all of his students to develop a three-step approach to their working process: 1) concept development, 2) execution, and 3) documentation. Like many artists working directly in the landscape or on a large-scale, Ana used drawing and writing proposals as a way of planning.

Consider what you've learned about Mendieta's life and work.

On a piece of notebook paper answer these questions:

- How did Mendieta's departure from Cuba influence her artwork?
- What aspects of her homeland did she identify with on a sensory and personal level?
- Why did she make artworks in nature?

Now, consider your own story. On a piece of notebook paper, write about an experience that has greatly shaped your life. This could be a positive event or a challenging one.

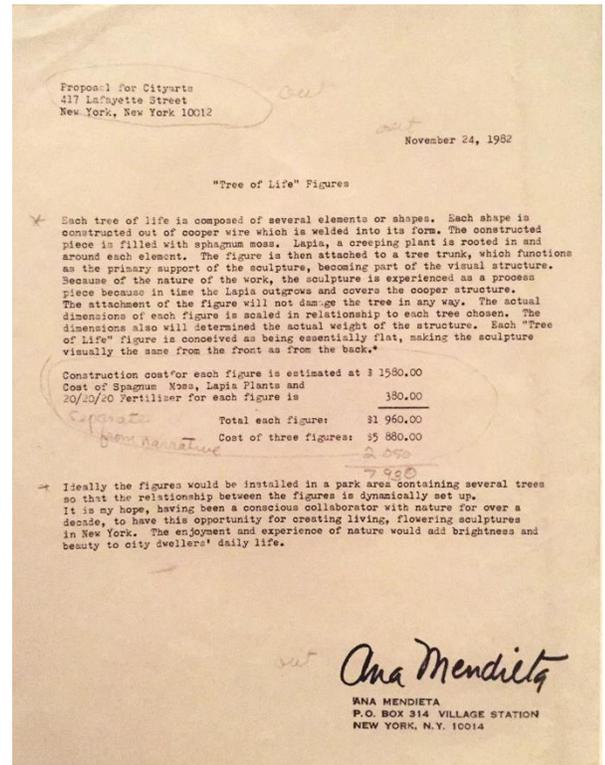
Use your notes to develop an idea, a written plan and a drawing for an artwork. Use the images and writing by Mendieta below as a helpful model for your work.

1. On a piece of sketchbook or copy paper, make drawings of the artwork you have in mind. This will help you determine what the artwork will look like, where it will exist, how large it will be and what materials it will be made of. Include written notes on your sketches.

2. Next, write a proposal to submit to the review committee (your teacher). It should include three parts:

- A description of the proposed artwork
- How it will benefit others (the people and the place)
- An estimated budget for materials and labor

3. Create a collage or a more detailed drawing of the artwork in a particular space.



Artist's proposal for Cityarts, New York City.



Nasher Sculpture Center