

Ana Mendieta: *Traces* – Et in Naturis Ego

In April 1970 the rosy waters of the Great Salt Lake in Utah became a work of art. Over the previous week the mechanical digger, the two large dump trucks and a front end loader had handled approximately 6.500 tonnes of basalt, dutifully depositing them in the northern, isolated part of the lake to create the *Spiral Jetty*. The site itself had not been chosen arbitrarily, its 27 percent salinity made the water into the suitable environment for a type of salt tolerant algae which gave the water a diaphanous, primordial pink colour. With the addition of the man made element of the artwork, the spiral causeway, it became obvious that the reference the minimalist artist Robert Smithson was making was to some natural, ancient starting point, some immemorial ordering of chaos and for some, more than anything, it became a symbol of our long journey out of nature.

From his vantage point - a hired helicopter, satisfied with the progress of the work and the anti-pastoral qualities of the project, Smithson remarked “et in Utah Ego” without knowing that a miscalculation of water levels meant that the work would be submerged a few years later, only to reappear by chance, in the late 90s, as a consequence of long draught.

It was during that same year that Ana Mendieta came up with the ultimately unrealised idea of a reaction to the Spiral Jetty, a reclaiming of nature on behalf of man and incidentally, the work that would obsess her throughout her career, the creation of a sculpture in the sky out of smoke. Indeed, it can be said that this idea of ephemerality that this prospective work strived to capture, united conceptually her entire future body of work, which is, at the moment explored in the spectacular show at the **Hayward Gallery** entitled **Ana Mendieta: *Traces***.

Her striking work is presented chronologically, and in that respect it informs the viewer about the artist’s conceptual evolution, her ideational blossoming. In the fecund mind of Mendieta it all started with the photographic suites.

In these series of photographs the artist explored ideas of deformation; at first of the female face in *Female Cosmetic Variations*, and then of the body in *Glass on Body Imprints*, but the most politically astute works are those that deal with the deformation of the idea of gender, the *Transplant Series*. In them, serious, weighty even laborious questions about femininity are asked in an unnervingly fluent ways, Mendieta choosing to present not only the results but also the process of the work. Aside from the disquiet they produce, what these early works achieve is a rendering of the artificial nature of any sort of distinction between beautiful – ugly, visceral-abstract and male-female dichotomies.

Further along, both temporarily and spatially, there is a sense of ascension. Her work starts to gather a type kind of mystical momentum, a momentum that is fully realised in works like *Body Tracks*, where the movement of the artist’s body is recorded on a canvas that had been freshly painted with a mixture of tempera and blood. The effect, paradoxically, is not gruesome, but incredibly assuring in terms of outlining the trace that even the most insignificant of creatures of flesh and blood will cause upon the world.

And then, magnificently, the idea of a fleeting presence is taken further in works like *Image from Yagul*, *Blood and Feathers*, and the *Tree of Life* where she places her body in nature, and becomes nature, not a monumental nature that distances but a type nature that is a hiding place, nature as collaborator. The *Silhouette Series*, on the other hand, are body like spaces in soil, traces of fire and gunpowder shaped like a female body, and probably most poetically of as foamy waves of a beach that inundate the imprint of Mendieta's flesh on the sand. The works of these two periods (Immersion and Silhouettes) are her most celebrated ones but despite the approachable geographies that gave her wide public acclaim, they carry an invisible refinement, a gauzy quality of the transient nature of these furtive creative miracles.

Further up in the gallery in the last two rooms a persistent, throbbing movement towards conceptuality becomes apparent with sculptures like *Totem Grove* and *The Leaf Designs*, works where the most non-natural part of what makes us human, the abstraction of symbols, is physically brought back, burnt and etched into nature. The tragedy is that, as her work was reaching such heights, her emotions were sinking ever deeper into the depression that eventually led to her death on the 8th of September 1985.

To conclude, what the show at the Hayward achieves is a revelation of the complexity of an otherwise short, supernova like career, a career that transcended artistic movements as diverse as conceptual art, minimalism and performance but it also captures the faint trace of the ineffable that makes Mendieta a truly great artist, the fact she manages to emerge from these telluric artistic landscapes of the 70s with works create a rumour, a whisper, a silhouette of the infinite.