Beyond the Threshold: Allusions to the Òrìṣà in Ana Mendieta's Silueta Series

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BEYOND THE THRESHOLD: ALLUSIONS TO THE ÔRÌṢÀ IN ANA MENDIETA’S SILUETA SERIES

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
May 2007
Acknowledgement

I would like to thank all the muses in my life, both known and unknown—those who have inspired without even knowing what their presence has meant to me. I owe the greatest amount of gratitude to all who have given without asking for anything in return; their sole desire being to help me realize the fullest potential of my life. Reaching this juncture in my life and education is truly a milestone and an accomplishment that is without a doubt a defining moment.

The faculty and staff of Virginia Commonwealth University’s Art History Department have been of great value to me during my academic endeavors. I hold in high esteem the dedication of the professors of the department to their students. Thank you Drs. Babatunde Lawal and Robert Hobbs for your continued assistance, guidance, and encouragement during the writing process of this thesis.

To my parents, Ms. Irene Moss-Allen and Mr. Fred Douglas January, if it were not for the two of you, I would not be where I am today—thank you kindly for providing the channel of life.

The last mile of the way is often the hardest to complete. It is during the final stretch when the most encouragement is needed so that the finish line can be met with enthusiasm. It sometimes takes outside support to muster up the gusto to break the tape that signifies completion of a race well ran. With this in mind, I salute my cheerleaders who have sparked and rekindled the fire needed to complete this leg of the journey. The
late Mrs. Bernice January, thank you for giving me the gift of “keep on going no matter what.” That lesson continues to serve me well. Mrs. Benita Colbert-Kaba, you sacrificed so that I may achieve and build a better tomorrow, there can never be enough words to express the gratitude I have for your presence and support. Support has come from many unexpected sources as well, and to you all I am eternally grateful.
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Abstract

BEYOND THE THRESHOLD: ALLUSION TO THE ÒRÌSÀ IN ANA MENDIETA’S SILUETA SERIES

By LaTricia January, BGS

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2007

Major Director: Dr. Babatunde Lawal
Professor, Department of Art History

The Cuban-born artist Ana Mendieta (1948-1985) created the Silueta Series during the 1970s and ‘80s. It consists of earth-body works in situ featuring the silhouette of the artist’s body fashioned from mud, plants, rocks, gunpowder and other materials. Underlying the creation of the Silueta Series is Mendieta’s belief that the elements are sentient and powerful beings. This perception is particularly strong in the Afro-Cuban religion Santeria, a creolized form of the Òrìsà tradition of the Yòrùbá of West Africa introduced to the Americas during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. While scholars have noted Mendieta’s incorporation of Santeria in her art, a thorough analysis of the iconographical references to the deities have yet to be explored. This thesis aims to
provide such an analysis of Mendieta’s works; thus enriching the current discourse on the
Silueta Series.
Introduction

Though some art historians have attempted to use a variety of labels to categorize and define them, Ana Mendieta’s works are imbued with a dynamic freedom that not only keeps her from being bound to any one label, but also reinvents the meaning found in her works. Mostly, she has been categorized as a performance, conceptual, feminist and/or a Latina artist. However, Mendieta, as an artist, crossed the thresholds of each of these labels in the course of exploring her creative talents. Often times she blurred or intentionally moved away from the lines separating labels used to define her works in order to keep her art “open”.¹ Her evolution as an artist was “intimately tied to the critical frameworks that existed and emerged around her.”² Therefore, her art, though reactionary, manifests an artistic freedom that transcends categorization. The subjects of her works, by nature, have an elusive appeal; thus, meaning is not fixed to one interpretation. The discourse between subject and viewer is not finite. She crossed cultural and spiritual boundaries, thereby adding to the depth of such dialogues. Her art is not just feminist, performative, or Hispanic; it is an exciting amalgam of these and other factors that had an impact on her.

She created the *Silueta Series* over a period of eight years. It is a collection of site-specific “earth-body works”\(^3\) containing silhouettes based on her body contours. They were created in various environmental settings such as a lake, a beach, a stone grave, or a grassy area using such materials as mud, ice, fireworks, blood, stones, and/or flowers. Mendieta purposefully created works in ephemeral materials, leaving them to merge back with nature. As a result, much of what is left of her oeuvre consists of photographic slides and video recordings of the artist’s creative process; which, can be likened to memories or traces of the past. The complete records of the artistic process are not available to the public, viewers see only what an art gallery displays—strategic manipulations of the documentation process that highlight the end results.

Since she matured as an artist in the 1970s when performance art was in vogue and many American artists used their bodies to articulate issues of the time, any interpretation of Mendieta’s work must recognize this development and its catalytic influence on her.

**The Politics of Performing and Interpreting the Body**

As several writers have pointed out, the body is much more than flesh and bones. Not only does the body play a part in defining the self, it is socially constructed—reflecting cultural, political and spiritual elements.\(^4\) During the Civil Rights and Women’s Liberation movements of the 1960s and ‘70s, the body played a critical role in

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\(^3\) Viso, 22.

“surfacing the performative dimensions of meaning production, including the highly
invested articulation of racialized, gendered, sexed, and nationalized identities that
accompanies any interpretative engagement.” No doubt, Mendieta’s Silueta Series had
close ties with Minimalism, Conceptualist and the feminist art movements of this period.
Yet, these connections provided her with a unique opportunity to use her body to inscribe
her Cuban identity on the American landscape. As she once said, “In my work I am in a
sense living my heritage. My sources are memories, images, experiences, and beliefs that
left their mark on me.” According to the artist’s sister, Raquelin Mendieta:

Art was a part of our childhood, a part of our family’s history. There were
strong threads running through our family: religion, politics, art… In our
house, as well as in our grandparents’ and other relatives’ houses, we had
live-in maids who were all nannies. Listening in on the conversations
amongst the maids was a great pastime… It informed us as to popular and
cultural things which would not have been a part of our lives otherwise.
There was no separation between Catholicism and Santeria in the Cuba we
knew. Santeria was considered, in our family, as the practice of
superstitious Catholics… Through the media and the maids’
conversations, we would hear about the day of Shango (St. Barbara),
December 4th; the day of Yemaya (the black mother with the white infant,
Virgin Regla) September 8th… Ana and I would sit very quietly amongst
the maids, as if we were not there, and listen to them talking about their
religious practices, about magic… We were fascinated, Ana loved listening
to this forbidden talk.

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5 Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (ed), Performing the Body, Performing the Text, (London and
6 Viso, 36.
(Barcelona) 1996, 223-70.
The major influence that Afro-Cuban religion of Santeria had on Mendieta is evident in her assignment of such titles as *Untitled (Ochún)* (1981), *Incantation a Olokun-Yemaya* (1977), and *Onile* (1984) to these works. Of course, it is possible to read wider meanings into the series, given the eclectic nature of the artist’s experiences and the infinite capacity of a work of art to stimulate a variety of reactions in different viewers. As coauthors Amelia Jones and Andre Stephenson aptly observe:

Artistic meaning can be understood as enacted through interpretative engagements that are themselves performative in their intersubjectivity. Thus, the artwork is no longer viewed as a static object with a single, prescribed signification that is communicated unproblematically and without default from the marker to an alert, knowledge, universalized viewer…

As classed, raced, sexed, and gendered (fully socialized and embodied) subjects, both artist and interpreter are imbricated within any potential determinations of meaning. The notion of the performative highlights the open-endedness of interpretation, which must thus be understood as a process rather than an act with a final goal, and acknowledges the ways in which circuits of desire or pleasure are at play in the complex web of relations among artists, patrons, collectors, and both specialized and non-specialized viewers.\(^8\)

Thus, by focusing on the elements of Òrìṣà symbolism in the *Silueta Series*, this thesis does not intend to close the door to any other “potential determinations of meanings.” Its ultimate goal is to enrich the literature for interpreting the series.

\(^8\) Jones and Stephenson, 1.
Literature Review

There were few writings on Mendieta’s work prior to her death in 1985. Since the mid 1990s, however, there have been several publications on the artist in the form of books, exhibition catalogues, journal articles and theses/dissertations. The most comprehensive text on Mendieta’s life and work so far is curator Olga Viso’s Ana Mendieta: Earth Body Sculpture and Performance, 1972-1985 (2004). It is a compendium of information and writings covering Mendieta’s life from childhood to adulthood. The text includes essays by Guy Brett, Julia P. Herzberg, Chrissie Iles, and Laura Roulet. Viso discusses events that may have influenced the direction of the Mendieta’s earlier works; her introduction and opening essay also help demystify Mendieta’s conflation of personal, spiritual, and artistic matters. Primarily, with Ana Mendieta, writers have focused on the tragedies of her life of and her passionate political views. Petra Barreras del Rio and John Perreault’s Ana Mendieta: A Retrospective (1987), is the exhibition catalogue for the first showing of the artist’s works posthumously. The text gives a brief overview of Mendieta’s life, beliefs, and feelings towards art. Mary Jane Jacob’s chapter, “Ashe in the Art of Ana Mendieta,” (in Arturo Lindsay’s Santeria Aesthetics, 1996), made a positive contribution to the study of Òrìṣà symbolism in Mendieta’s Silueta Series.

Another important publication on the artist is Jane Blocker’s Where is Ana Mendieta?: Identity, Performativity, and Exile (1999). Based on Blocker’s dissertation for Wayne State University, it critiques the exclusion of Mendieta’s contributions from recent art history. As Viso has pointed out, Blocker’s “analysis provided an important
consideration of Mendieta’s art within the context of postmodern and post-colonial
critical practices.9 Identically, Blocker’s title echoes the chant used by protesters at the
formal opening of the SoHo branch of the now-closed Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
in New York on July 25, 1992. Members of the Women’s Action Coalition (WAC)
organized a protest to draw attention to what they regarded as the Guggenheim’s sexist
policies.10

Mendieta had several ideas for publications but was unable to realize her dreams
due to her untimely death. These ideas are the subject of Ana Mendieta: A Book of Works
(1993), edited by Bonnie Clearwater. The book includes several sketches and
photographs of earth-body works created by Mendieta during her visits to Cuba as well as
several unpublished artist statements.

As Mendieta’s popularity has increased through the years, students of the arts
have been more apt to engage Mendieta’s works in their studies. Julia Herzberg’s
completed in 1998 at City University of New York and is the basis of her contribution to
Viso’s Ana Mendieta: Earth Body Sculpture and Performance, 1972-1985. There have
been a number of Master’s theses written such as Tiffany Lundeen Frost’s “Ana
Mendieta, Pressed for Space: Locating the Place for the Colored Female Body in the
Contemporary Gallery” (2000), and Susan Annette Steffen’s “Gunpowder, Rocks, and

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9 Viso, 28.
10 Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrand (ed), The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the
Currently, scholars have acknowledged Mendieta’s usage of Òrîṣà symbolism in her works; however this has been done without fully exploring the broader implications of such references. To briefly discuss these allusions to the Afro-Cuban deities restricts her art to primarily feminist readings; therefore detraacting from the openness of the *Siluetas*. Thusly, the goal of this thesis is to provide the descriptors that relate the Òrîṣà to the natural materials Mendieta relied on to create the series. By doing so this thesis will provide an in depth iconographical analysis of the artist’s works based on the Òrîṣà traditions. This expands current scholarship and offers new perspectives on Òrîṣà iconography in the *Silueta Series*. 
Chapter 1

Imprints on a Soul:
The Education of Ana Mendieta

Born November 18, 1948, Ana Mendieta reached the shores of the United States September 11, 1961, from Cuba. She went on to become one of the most progressive artists of her time. Mendieta relied heavily on her life’s experiences to make powerful personal statements and political via her art. Through the utilization of personal aspects of her life and her signature silhouettes, she reinserted her identity in her work. This act made her art easily recognizable to viewers, even to this day. However, what may continue to elude viewers concerns the seemingly coincidental circumstances that impacted Mendieta’s life.

It is undeniable that moving from Cuba to the United States changed her life. After a relatively stable childhood in Cuba—her paradise was suddenly interrupted by political upheaval. Her father, Ignacio Mendieta was initially a government employee and an avid supporter of Fidel Castro. When Castro’s new government began running background checks on employees, Ignacio’s involvement with anti-Communist investigations as well as his connections with the United States Federal Bureau of Investigations and American corporations were exposed.11 These associations called into

11 Viso, 38.
question his dedication and loyalty to the Cuban government and Castro’s mission. He was then asked to “affirm is solidarity by joining” the Communist Party. Ignacio refused and was then laid off and subsequently blacklisted. Publicly, Ignacio maintained a pro-Castro stance while privately encouraging counterrevolutionary activities.

In December 1960, Operation Pedro Pan was executed. Many children between the ages of six and sixteen from mostly upper-middle class Cuban families were exiled to the U.S. “in response to reports that Castro planned to send [Cuba’s] youth to live and work in state-run facilities…where they would be indoctrinated in Communist ideology.” The following year, Ignacio decided to send Ana and her older sister, Raquelín to the U.S. on the assumption that the separation would only last for a short period of time. However he was terribly mistaken. The girls “would not see their mother and [younger] brother again until January 1966 or their father, who had been imprisoned in Cuba, until April 1979.” Also, the sisters were moved a total of four times before gaining any sense of stability.

During their subsequent formative years in Iowa that Mendieta became painfully aware of cultural and geographic differences between her native Cuba and the United States. Viso points out the stark contrast between the two worlds the sisters had experienced in childhood:

The relocation to Iowa was difficult for the sisters. They felt isolated and abandoned. The geographic remoteness and frigid climate came as a shock, as did the discrimination they suffered as foreigners in an area

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12 Viso, 38.
13 Viso, 38.
14 Viso, 39.
15 Viso, 39.
unaccustomed to Latin Culture. According to Raquelín, at the time they had no idea of the magnitude of Operation Pedro Pan: they felt completely alone in their experience of displacement.¹⁶

At this point, Mendieta began to experience the disconnectedness from her surroundings and others. Quite likely the impact of being seen as “the other” started to take root and had a traumatic effect on her. Even more, the sisters arrived in the U.S. during the Civil Rights movement, a time when racial tension between whites and non-whites were intense—and they felt discriminated against. Art historian Kaira Cabanas explains:

> Although their skin was “white,” Ana and Raquel became targets of racism. During high school in the late 1960s, their classmates called Ana “nigger” and told her, “Go back to Cuba, you whore.” These experiences exacerbated their feelings of alienation and displacement, and accordingly, both women later began identifying themselves as “non-white.”¹⁷

Mendieta said of this time in her life:

> It’s then that I realized that I lived in a little world inside my head. It wasn’t that being different was bad, it’s just that I had never realized that people were different. So trying to find a place in the earth and trying to define myself came from that experience of discovering differences.¹⁸

¹⁶ Viso, 39.
¹⁸ Roulet, 227.
Educational Background

From 1965 to 1966, Mendieta attended Briar Cliff College and then in 1967, transferred to the University of Iowa. The University of Iowa offered Mendieta an artistic outlet as well as an avenue to expand her creative explorations. She took a variety of undergraduate courses, including one on “Primitive Art.” She received her Bachelor of Arts in 1969 and began graduate studies in painting later that year. In the fall of 1970, She met Hans Breder, an art professor and a German artist, “with whom she developed a romantic partnership and enriching creative alliance that lasted throughout the 1970s.”

Breder possessed an eclectic artistic background prior to moving to Iowa. He had been active in the New York art community during the mid-1960s, “attending multimedia Happenings and international Fluxus and Intermedia events.” Breder brought to Iowa, a penchant for experimentations, combining the “visual, performing, and literary arts.” He also maintained his ties to the European art community and was “particularly interested in the disturbing, ritual-based actions of the Viennese Actionists.” He established the Intermedia Program at the University of Iowa. This program emphasized performance as a critical new medium of expression. Breder highlighted “the space between disciplines, media, and art forms,” hence the term “intermedia”. Mendieta took her first class in the then new Intermedia Program in 1971.

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19 Roulet, 228.
20 Viso, 40.
21 Viso, 40.
22 Viso, 40.
23 Viso, 40.
24 Viso, 41.
Breder encouraged his students to move beyond the boundaries of solid form and rigid categorization of artistic style and expression. He invited faculty from other departments “to present and create works and engage in lively discussion that stimulated unconventional channels of exchange.”26 In an effort to help students “break the barriers between art and life,”27 Breder promoted the incorporation of the physical body in his student’s art. To support these teachings, he introduced his students to artists associated with Viennese Actionism such as Otto Muhl, Hermann Nitsch and Gunter Brus. 28 As Viso puts it,

Out of Viennese Actionism, Mendieta drew ideas about subject matter and process, such as the incorporation of blood and animal carcass, as well as tied and bundled figures. Actionism’s deeper notions of physical and spiritual catharsis, which were tied to its members’ fascination with Romantic, Dionysian, and Catholic mythology, and the desire to release post-World War II traumas and anxieties, struck a chord with Mendieta, who turned to her own Catholic background and ultimately to the tortured colonial history of Mexico and the Caribbean for inspiration. These correlations link Mendieta’s early performance based works to European ideas about performance, with its emphasis on psychology and mysticism, more than to American performance art, which was in large measure focused on the psychology of human behavior.29

Religious subject matter was a major component of Viennese Actionism. The movement relied on the shock value of extreme tableaux to evoke emotional reactions from viewers. It is only natural to deduce that her indirect associations with this group

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26 Viso, 42.
27 Viso, 43.
28 Viso, 43.
29 Viso, 44.
marked the beginning of Mendieta’s exploration of the possibilities of art. Traditional painting and sculpture could no longer satisfy her artistic impulses. The intermedia process offered a full-bodied flavor that Mendieta craved for and which allowed her to channel her passions, beliefs, and explorations unimpeded. Mendieta’s graduate pieces are expressions of the new found artistic freedom she experienced during that period in her education. According to Mendieta:

When I realized that my paintings were not real enough for what I wanted the image to convey—and by real I mean I wanted my images to have power, to be magic. I decided that for the images to have magic qualities I had to work directly with nature. I had to go to the source of life, to mother earth.  

Through the incorporation of her body contours and ethnic heritage, she began to chart a new course. Most Americans had never heard of Santeria, experienced animal sacrifice, and had a preconceived notion of all things foreign. Against this backdrop, Mendieta could offer a striking artistic contrast that set her apart from many of her peers at the university. She reflected:

By using my self-image in my art, I am confronting the ever-present art and life dichotomy. It is crucial for me to be a part of all my works. As a result of my participation, my vision becomes a reality and part of my experiences.

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30 Roulet, 230.
It was at this time, Mendieta developed very strong emotions towards the use of raw materials. She began to use blood or make references to blood, saying, “I think it’s a very powerful, magical thing. I don’t see it as a negative force.”\textsuperscript{32} Mendieta’s artistic freedom to incorporate the use of blood may also have been influenced by Viennese Actionism, however, the ritualistic undertones in which accompanied her usage possibly came from a number of other sources, including the stories of ceremonies she remembered from her childhood. Consequently, it is possible that the teachings of Breder and her connection with Viennese Actionism encouraged Mendieta to identify more closely with the phenomenology of animal sacrifice in Santeria.

Breder insisted that his students “emphasize the process over the making of the objects…all steps were integral to the artwork.”\textsuperscript{33} As a result, many of his students’ works were transitory, and the only way to capture an artistic activity or performance was to document it through film or photography. As Viso observes:

Breder’s teachings emphasized the following process, to which Mendieta subscribed throughout her career: 1) formulate a proposal for the work; 2) execute it; 3) document the activity. That Mendieta believed the residue of her actions had the power to communicate ideas, behaviors, and history is clearly evidenced by the thousands of slides and photographic negatives dating from 1971 to 1985 that remain in her archive. In an early artist’s

\textsuperscript{32} Roulet, 231.
\textsuperscript{33} Viso, 44.
statement she expressed the hope that her photographs allowed viewers to imagine themselves, herself, as well as shared and individual histories.34 The place where her art was/is presented or featured becomes a meeting point between separate worlds and realities of individuals—a means by which she engaged the viewer in visual dialogue on ethnicity, politics, religion, and personal identity.

In 1971, Mendieta spent the summer in San Juan Teotihuacán for the “Field Research in Archaeology” course. This was the first time, since leaving Cuba that she would step on a soil that enabled her to reconnect more fully with her Latin heritage, in spite of any cultural differences between Cuba and Mexico.35 Again, a new world of expression and possibilities opened to Mendieta. While on this trip, she studied late Aztec and early colonial artifacts and was most fascinated by images associated with Aztec deities. It is possible that she first experienced the life-death-rebirth paradigm during this visit. After returning to Iowa at the beginning of the fall semester, Mendieta began experimenting with new materials. Art historian Julia Herzberg described one of Mendieta’s experiments:

She put a bean in one of her nostrils. After a week or two the bean began to sprout, causing problems in her sinuses, so it had to be removed. This was an important initial step in treating her body as a receptacle for germination and incubation. With those possibilities in mind, Mendieta went on to explore the body and its potential in a more studied fashion.36

34 Viso, 44.
35 Herzberg, 137.
36 Viso, 144.
She continued her study of the body and issues of cultural mores, sexual power, and gender-bending through the implications and meanings of facial hair in such works as *Untitled (Facial Cosmetic Variations)* (1972) and *Untitled (Facial Hair Transplants)* (1972). *Untitled (Facial Cosmetic Variations)* formed the basis of images submitted for her master’s thesis for the painting program.\(^{37}\) This work is composed of a series of shots in which she altered her appearance with the use of wigs, a sweater, and nylon pantyhose. Each image presents a different facial distortion or persona. In *Untitled (Facial Hair Transplant)*, she meticulously glued the trimmed hairs from her friend, Morty Sklar, onto her own face. In a statement that accompanied her thesis submission, Mendieta “acknowledged Duchamp’s famous *Rrose Sélavy* and *L.H.O.O.Q.* as a source of her work.”\(^{38}\) As with many of her contemporaries, Mendieta also addressed the issue of gender and identity transformation in these two pieces.

Breder assigned the writings of Carlos Castaneda such as *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (1968).\(^{39}\) Significant in the novels of Castaneda is the teaching of moving beyond normalcy in one’s endeavor to walk the path of the “spiritual warrior”. The spiritual warrior is one who utilizes unconventional means to transform, achieve, acquire personal power and navigate non-physical worlds. Castaneda’s writings may have inspired or at the very least offered reinforcement to Mendieta’s ideas of spiritual transformation and altered perception signified by the utilization of bird and animal imagery in ancient cultures. In Castaneda’s writings it is not unusual for the

\(^{37}\) Viso, 147.  
\(^{38}\) Viso, 147.  
\(^{39}\) Herzberg, 159.
protagonist (Castaneda himself) to encounter shape shifters or to shape shift as he traverses other non-physical realities. This attitude is in accord with bird motifs of many varieties which have long symbolized wisdom, spiritual astuteness, freedom, magic and the journey from one world to another.

Between 1973 and 1980, Mendieta revisited Mexico each summer. In an interview with Judith Wilson, the artist said, “Plugging into Mexico was like going back to the source, being able to get some magic just by being there.” She developed the subjects of entombment/freedom and the shift between presence/absence became more apparent in her works through the use of silhouettes. Spurred by the enchanting mythos of Mexico’s mysterious past and the religious customs of the present, the artist was prompted to experiment with her personhood, enacting the visions that materialized the Silueta Series.

Mendieta created her first Silueta in Mexico, Imagen de Yagul (1973). In it, she explored how impressions could be used as artistic tools. Non-tangible impressions occur at three different levels in the Siluetas. First there is the impression of an idea envisioned by the artist; secondly there is the impression of the structured image of that idea on film; thirdly, the image in a given film or photograph creates an impression on the mind of the viewer. This of course follows the creative process structure that Mendieta learned from Breder.

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**Artistic Development**

By the mid 1970s, the artist move beyond Breder’s instruction. Before graduating in 1977 with a Master’s of Fine Arts in mixed media, she had already developed friendships with artist and writer John Perreault and feminist critic and curator Lucy Lippard both of whom she had met in 1975 when they lectured at the University of Iowa.\(^{41}\) Mendieta seized the opportunity to share her *Body Tracks* series with Lippard. According to Viso, Lippard mentioned Mendieta’s work in an article in *Ms. Magazine*; she also went on to exhibit and publish Mendieta’s work for several years thereafter.\(^{42}\) Lippard brought Mendieta national recognition and introduced her to other critical female artists of the time such as Mary Beth Edelson a founding member of A.I.R. Gallery, a woman’s collective art space.\(^{43}\) Mendieta was admitted into the collective in June 1978.\(^{44}\) She had situated herself with a powerful and vocal group seeking to obviate what they perceived as thousands of years of patriarchal oppression.

This was a period in Mendieta’s career when she openly included references to goddesses from ancient cultures in her works. Edelson, an advocate of the Great Goddess\(^{45}\), opened Mendieta’s eyes to Western Feminist thought as did other women artists with whom she was associated. Mendieta shared her own knowledge of goddesses from ancient cultures with Edelson. For her master’s thesis, the artist included images of

\(^{41}\) Viso, 175.  
\(^{42}\) Viso, 175.  
\(^{43}\) Roulet, 233.  
\(^{44}\) Viso, 71.  
\(^{45}\) In reaction to male domination, many feminist activists turned to the Great Goddess. Female deities from around the world were referenced frequently in the works of feminist artist. The objective was to return to a period when women were a dominant or at the very least respected force in society. See Merlin Stone. *When God was a Woman*. New York: Dial Press, 1976.
*El Ix-Chell Negro*, (1977) based on an ancient Mayan goddess. What is significant here is her use of a goddess’ name. This became pronounced after Mendieta’s introduction to Edelson.\(^46\) Through these associations, she created a platform from which she more definitively charted her career.

However, as time passed, Mendieta “became increasingly conscious of the feminist moniker and the potential for its “essentialist” associations.”\(^47\) Having her works limited to only feminist readings and interpretations restricted the openness she desired\(^48\). Unfortunately, Western Feminism did not coincide with her ideas for it did not address the concerns of non-white and non-American women. Having already experienced the pangs of racism, Mendieta created a platform for addressing race, gender and identity issues. Mendieta curated an exhibition and organized a panel discussion entitled “The Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States.” In the introductory essay, she wrote:

> During the mid-to late 1960s as women in the United States politicized themselves and came together in the Feminist Movement with the purpose to end the domination and exploitation by the white male middle class movement. This exhibition points not necessarily to the injustice or incapacity of a society that has not been willing to include us, but more toward a personal will to continue being ‘other’.

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\(^{46}\) Viso, 70.

\(^{47}\) Viso, 72.


\(^{49}\) Viso, 73.
Mendieta altered the form of the silhouettes found in her works in the late 1970s to emphasize androgynous figures.\textsuperscript{50} Her works became bigger than the feminist agendas of her peers.

In 1980, Mendieta made her first of seven “return” trips to Cuba. The journey was a pivotal point in her life as it helped to mend the shattered pieces of her childhood. She explained:

I was afraid before I went there, because I felt here I’ve been living my life with this obsessive thing in my mind—what if I found out it has nothing to do with me? But the minute I got there, it was this whole thing of belonging again.\textsuperscript{51}

During Mendieta’s first trip to Cuba, she visited a babalawo (priest) for a spiritual reading and traveled to Regla, an old town “where Cuba’s Abakua community is concentrated.”\textsuperscript{52} Vehemently, Mendieta ingested as much as she could of Cuban culture and life. Though she had finally reached home and had brought her artistic talents back to their source, her journey in many ways had just begun. The trips to Cuba gave her a greater sense of self and connectedness to other Cubans living in the United States. The works she created based on the Santeria Òrìṣà traditions served as an expression of cultural unity with other Cubans. Though not all Cubans practice Santeria, they are well aware of the religion and its multicultural foundation. In part, it is the hybridity and

\textsuperscript{50} Viso, 74
\textsuperscript{51} Roulet, 235.
\textsuperscript{52} Viso, 80.
transcultural nature of Santeria that may have also attracted the artist to incorporate its iconographical lexicon.

Mendieta began to engage Cuban devotees of Santeria in a dialogue of country and religion. She created *Isla (Island)* (1981) at Old Man’s Creek in Iowa; however it represents the island nation of Cuba. In shallow waters, Mendieta fashioned an androgynous form without arms and legs. The torso of the *Silueta* comes to a point; there was nothing to identify the image as either female or male. The silhouette is surrounded by water; the reflection of clouds in the sky is seen clearly in the water. Perhaps, the reference to Cuba created in Iowa speaks to Mendieta’s walking in two worlds of contrasting cultures. In the same year, she created a *silueta Untitled (Ochún)*, in Miami, Florida. Ọṣùn is a water deity in Santeria and is associated with the patron saint of Cuba. The significance of this piece will be discussed further in Chapter 3. Toward the end of the same year, Mendieta created *Ceiba Fetish* (1981), a work that survived far longer than Mendieta had anticipated. It was located in the Cuban Memorial Park in Miami’s “Little Havana” dedicated to Cuban exiles in the U.S. and those who died during the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. One of the central features of the park is a large ceiba tree (silk cotton tree). As Viso puts it:

Mendieta was especially drawn to the ceiba, which is revered by Africans as well as Afro-Cubans and devotees of Santeria and is often the site of devotional offerings. Also a potent symbol of fortitude in Miami exile history, the resilient tree, which is able to withstand severe droughts because of its unique rooting system, metaphorically connects the exile to the land. For this piece, Mendieta incorporated three natural bumps, or blemishes, in the trunk of the tree (which resembled open wounds or
female genitals), as well as part of a wandering root, as elements of the final standing figure. The placement of the root in the genital area of the figure suggests that the fetish may be masculine...Mendieta outlined the blemishes and figure using cut human hair glued directly to the bark. She collect the hair from a salon or barber nearby...and may have mixed it with her own strands as well as the hair of her romantic partner, Carl Andre to create a “lover’s mix.” Residues of *Ceiba Fetish* are still visible in the park.\(^5\)

Over the years, Santeria devotees added to Mendieta’s work by placing offerings around the figure. Mendieta’s appropriation was essentially re-appropriated by the community. For Mendieta, this was an honor; it “affirmed her connection to the broader Afro-Cuban diaspora culture.”\(^5\) She truly had contributed aspects of her own tradition to contemporary art and became a part of the Cuban cultural collective.

Around this time Mendieta considered the impermanent nature of her works. In 1982 she received a New York State Council on the Arts grant to publish a book and portfolio of etchings of the *Esculturas Rupestres*, earth-works created during her visits to Cuba. In her grant application she wrote:

> In galleries and museums the earth/body sculptures come to the viewers by ways of photos, because the work necessarily always stays in situ. Because of this and due to the impermanence of the sculptures the photographs become a very vital part of my work. And so it follows due to the

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\(^5\) Viso, 95.  
\(^5\) Viso, 95.
importance of the photographs in my work that I would want to make a
publication of them. I have thought about it often.55

Mendieta was never able to complete both this and other publication projects she was
working on at that time. However, Bonnie Clearwater edited *Ana Mendieta: A Book of
Works*, 1993. The book is a reproduction, in facsimile, of photo etchings of the sculptures
and is based on Mendieta’s notes that described how she envisioned her book of works.

Mendieta also received a number of different residencies, commissions and
special projects. As an adjunct professor at the College of Old Westbury campus of the
State University of New York, she created rooms-sized projects for solo exhibitions at the
college gallery.56 The artist also participated in outdoor sculpture festivals such as “Plakat
Aktion” (1980), a city-wide billboard project in Germany; “Art Across the Park” in New
York’s Central Park (1980); la Cuarta Bienal in Medellin, Colombia (1981); and the
Washington Project for the Arts (WPA) in Washington DC (1981).57 In the spring, 1983,
she was awarded the Prix de Rome in sculpture. She was offered a one year residency at
the American Academy in Rome with a studio.58

In examining Mendieta’s history, it is fair to say that she was accustomed to
identifying with foreign cultures from youth. She found her place amidst the unfamiliar—
using such occurrences to enrich her creative expressions. It is not an exaggeration to say
that she was perhaps artistically inspired by immersing herself in foreign cultures. In
other words, her most profound works had been the result of displacement—first from

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55 Clearwater, 41.
56 Viso, 101.
57 Viso, 101.
58 Viso, 117.
Cuba to United States, Iowa to Mexico, New York to Cuba, Cuba back to the United States, and finally to Rome. In Rome, she made permanent works such as *Figura de Fango (Mud Figure)* (1983-1984) which was created from mixing sand or earth with a binding agent.

Mendieta formulated her own visual lexicon based on the conflation of life experience, creative expression, and mythos from around the world. Reality as seen by an artist is often times an obscure variation or abstraction of the reality that the general society experiences on a day-to-day basis. The artist becomes a visual-philosopher expressing theories, hypotheses, deductions and conclusions through image-text rather than volumes of printed text. Mendieta was a visual-philosopher straddling the lines that divide cultures, religions, political positions and so on. Metaphorically, she used the reality of the world as a backdrop for her own personal artistic expression. This process of walking in two worlds is expressed in Mendieta’s works through her handling of form and idea by specifically choosing to work with certain ephemeral materials to manifest her creative impulses.
Chapter 2

Yòrùbá Deities Abroad: The Òrìṣà in Afro-Cuban Santeria

*Naturaleza = criadero de dioses
(Nature = breeding ground of the gods)*


As her sister Raquelín testified, Mendieta loved listening to stories told by house maids about Santeria.\(^{59}\) Also known as Regla de Ocha (way of the Òrìṣà), Santeria is a hybrid religion established in Cuba during the time of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. It is a mixture of West African traditions from the Yòrùbá and Bantu and Catholicism. However, the most prevalent influence is that of the Yòrùbá traditions.

Numbering over 20 million people, the Yòrùbá live in Nigeria, the Republic of Benin and Togo. Traditional Yòrùbá cosmology is based on a hierarchal structure that does not necessarily flow up and down in a straight line; the flow spirals from source to creation back to source. At the apex of the cosmological hierarchy is the source of existence, Ọlọdumárà, who is neither female nor male. Under Ọlọdumárà are lesser deities called Òrìṣà as well as ancestors and other supernatural forces. These spirits manipulate a vital enabling power known as aṣe on behalf of Ọlọdumárà. Although the Òrìṣà are said to number 401, the following are the most popular.

\(^{59}\) Roulet, 232.
The Òrìṣà

Ọbatala wields the aṣe associated with creativity. He is sometimes said to have created land out of the primordial waters. He is the sculptor who molds the human body and other physical beings inhabiting the Earth; therefore he also gives children to barren mothers.⁶⁰ His sacred color is white and his shrines are filled with white cloth and drawings of the same color.⁶¹ He rules over healthy mental functions, creativity of thought, and in the reverse, insanity. After Ọbatala molds the human body, Ọlọdumářé breathes life into it. Though Ọbatala is responsible for creating the human form, he cannot place the ẹ́mí (living soul) into the sculptured form. Only Ọlọdumářé, the source of creation, can give a soul to any material manifestation.

Orunmila and Èṣù are two Òrīṣà who work hand in hand. Their position in Yòrùbá cosmology is of great importance. Ọrùnmílà is believed to be gifted with knowledge and wisdom. Being a witness to creation, he knows the secrets of the universe and assists humanity through divination. Hence he is called “Ibikeji Edumare” (second only to Ọlọdumářé). Èṣù is the keeper of aṣe. He is also known as the trickster; the guardian of boundaries, gates, and the crossroads. Ọrùnmílà and Èṣù pertain to destiny or the path on which one should travel in life; thus, they guide individuals toward fulfilling their destinies in life. Èṣù represents contradiction in the form of dualism, and Ọrùnmílà resolves these paradoxes and contradictions by means of the guidance delivered through divination and inspired dreams.

⁶⁰ Viso, 21.
⁶¹ Viso, 21.
Ôgún is the divine blacksmith; the creator of tools and weapons. According to Yórùbá mythology, he used his machete to cut a path through the primordial jungle of the newly created Earth. Hence he is “associated with clearing the way or removing barriers;”\(^\text{62}\) when devotees encounter difficulties. According to some Yórùbá, Ilẹ (Earth as a deity)\(^\text{63}\) is connected with Ôgún because the iron tools he fashioned are used to clear forests for urban development. He has ties to the agriculture deity, Ôrìṣà Oko\(^\text{64}\), because most Yórùbá farming implements are made from iron. In addition, he complements Òṣanyin\(^\text{65}\), the deity of herbal medicine, since knives are used to cut herbs and make medicinal incisions on the body. Above all, Ôgún is venerated by warriors because not only did he fashion the first weapon, but he is remembered as a great warrior.

Ṣàngó is a very popular deity; said to have been an ancient king of the Yórùbá kingdom of Ôyọ who had a special charm for invoking lightning to overpower his enemies on the battle field. As a result, after his death, he was deified and associated with the thunderstorm and with Jàkúta (a primordial solar deity who is the guardian of social morality and justice).\(^\text{66}\) His most sacred symbol is a polished ax or thunderstones (stones struck by lightening). The oral tradition of the Yórùbá says this of Sàngo, “\textit{Iná lójú, iná...}”

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\(^{63}\) Ilẹ is not only the Earth but also the land. “The earth is venerated in Yorubaland because it is believed to be inhabited by a spirit.” The planet of the earth houses a variety of entities both seen and unseen. In a metaphorical sense, these beings are a part of a larger force that is the spirit of Ilẹ.

\(^{64}\) Ôrìṣà Oko is considered a “white dressed” deity like Obatala. The usual implement at his shrine is a large iron staff that represents both male and female aspects of fertility. It is believed that Ôrìṣà Oko put the aṣe in the ground so that causes vegetation to grow.

\(^{65}\) The shrine of Òṣanyin also uses an iron staff. Bird motifs are featured prominently at the top of the staff because of the spiritual power the motif represents. Devotees to this deity are said to be remarkable herbalist. They forge a “working” relationship with other supernatural forces of the forests/bush where many medicinal herbs grow in the wild. Both Òṣanyin and Ôrìṣà Oko are called “friends” because of they utilize herbal magic to cure and perform other supernatural tasks.

\(^{66}\) Awolalu, 35.
lènì, iná lórùlè ilè,” “There is fire in his eyes, fire in his mouth, fire in the roof.” This speaks of Sango veracity and strength as well as his spiritual prowess.

There are several female Òrìṣà in the Yòrùbá pantheon and many are associated with water. Olókun is Ọba Òmí, ruler of waters.⁶⁷ Oceans cover the majority of the earth. There is a world beneath the waters very few are able to see. Not even a scientist can say with certainty what resides at the bottom of the ocean. This is what makes Olókun the keeper of riches unknown to humans and also the keeper of secrets. Devotees may pray to Olókun to be cloaked or shielded from their enemies; this is done because of Olókun’s secretive nature. All waters pay tribute to Olókun because all rivers and underground water sources eventually flow back to the oceans. This is part of what makes Olókun a wealthy deity.⁶⁸

Yemọja, whose name is usually etymologized as “Yeye ọmọ eja,” (Mother of fish), is connected to the seas and beaches. She also serves as a messenger for Olokun.⁶⁹ Yemọja buffers Olókun from air and dry land. In Santeria she is equated with Olókun, and they are seen as one and the same. As a result, Yemoja, Olokun and Ilẹ are sometimes perceived as separate aspects of the same female principle in nature. They are collectively venerated as Iyá Nla, the Great Mother, who generates and nurtures life in the physical world.⁷⁰

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⁶⁷ Awolalu, 47.  
Although the goddess Ọsún is associated with a river that flows through the Yorùbá town of Oṣogbo, she is worshipped throughout Yorùbáland for fertility, wealth, and other good fortunes of life. Through hardship and strife, Ọsún perseveres and overcomes the greatest of obstacles. She not only represents the finer and sweeter aspects of life, but also speaks to long sought victory after perilous journeys. Various legends identify her as a brave and fearless deity. In one story, Ọsún is said to have saved humanity from self destruction. In another, she turns physical blemish into something beautiful and valued; she employs her feminine guile and wit to outsmart her opponents. She becomes victorious by utilizing these aspects of femininity, traditionally considered passive often subversive approaches. She is said to be one of the wives of Ọsàngó.

Another prominent female Òrìṣà is Oya, the goddess associated with the air and tornadoes. She is a female warrior, ready to fight and die alongside her husband, Ọsàngó, and fellow combatants. Hence she is addressed as “obinrin ti ó t’ori ogun da irugbon si,” (the woman who grows a beard because of war). 71 She is the only female deity that is depicted riding a horse, an act that is recognized as masculine. As the deity associated with strong winds, she precedes Ọsàngó when appears in the form of thunderstorms; she clears the way for her husband’s presence. Oya’s association with air allows her a connection with other male Òrìṣà. Òrìṣà Oko also works with Oya. Pollen is carried by the wind to pollinate flowers—which this process relates to Òrìṣà Oko.72

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72 Edwards and Mason, 73.
Art in Yorùbá Religion

Art (ona) plays an important role in the Yorùbá religion, partly because of its supernatural origin and partly because of its capacity to not only embody the spiritual, but also to communicate ideas and aesthetic values. As mentioned earlier, Yorùbá cosmology traces the origin of the human body to Òbatala who takes the finished sculpture to Òlódùmárè to imbue it with divine breath (èmí) that infuses it with life. Thus, art makes the human soul manifest in the physical world, so that earthly life is a kind of performance during which the soul animates the body and the body serves as a mask for the soul. This explains the emphasis on possession in Yorùbá religion. This is when the spirit of a deity is thought to manifest itself in the body of a devotee, thereby communicating with humanity through her/his voice or actions.

Artistic elaboration of an altar image reflects adoration and worship. However, it should be emphasized that most sacred symbols of an Òrìṣà placed on an altar are non-figurative or are natural objects such as stones, shells, or charms. It is on these symbols that food offerings and animal sacrifices are made to reinforce prayers. Since the essence of Òlódùmáré is considered too sublime and beyond human comprehension, S/he is not personified in art. The Yorùbá invoke the Òrìṣà in order to harness the deities’ spiritual powers or aṣe to reinforce the human experience on earth.⁷³

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The Òrìṣà in Afro-Cuban Santeria

As a result of the trans-Atlantic slave trade between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, many Yòrùbá were shipped to the Americas, especially Cuba. There they continued to venerate their deities in the guise of Roman Catholic saints. This was done by matching an Òrìṣà with a saint who seemed to have similar attributes. For example, St. Lazarus (identified as a leper and patron saint of the sick) was equated with Ọṣọpọonna/Obalúaiye, the Yòrùbá deity of smallpox and other infectious diseases. This resulted in the concealment of the sacred symbol of Ọṣọpọonna/Obalúaiye among images and chromolithographs of St. Lazarus. The camouflage gave birth to the hybrid Afro-Cuban religion of Santeria or Regla de Ocha, which has since become a major component of the religious heritage of Cuba. The most popular Yòrùbá Òrìṣà in Santeria are listed below with their Catholic counterpart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yòrùbá Òrìṣà</th>
<th>Catholic Saint(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ọbatala</td>
<td>Jesus Christ, St. Joseph, and Our Lady of Mercy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esu</td>
<td>Infant of Atocha, St. Anthony of Padua, St. Martin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ogun</td>
<td>St. Peter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orunmila</td>
<td>St. Francis of Assissi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sàngó</td>
<td>St. Barbara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemoja</td>
<td>Virgin of Regla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oya</td>
<td>Virgin of Candlemas, St. Teresa of the Infant Jesus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osun</td>
<td>Charitable Virgin of El Cobre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ọṣọpọonna</td>
<td>St. Lazarus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Òrìṣà Oko</td>
<td>St. Isidore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osanyin</td>
<td>St. Joseph, St. Benedictine, St. Jerome</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

74 Barnet, 41-69.
A brief discuss of the relevance of elements within the Yòrùbá cosmology is given here to more fully relate the deities to the Siluetas. The Òrìṣà are not necessarily the elements, but they utilize the physical and spiritual attributes of these materials. The Yòrùbá believe that there are several spirits residing in the wind.⁷⁵ The Òrìṣà Oya is a perfect example. Oya, as mentioned previously, is associated with the wind; however she is not the wind. She is a force that invokes or utilizes it. Afẹfẹ, wind, is the messenger or servant of Oya.

The planet of the earth houses a variety of entities both seen and unseen. In a metaphorical sense, these beings are a part of a larger force that is Ilè. Mountains, though created from land masses pushing together, possess a unique spirit according to Yòrùbá cosmology. The same happens with trees, such as the silk cotton tree (ceiba) that is so important to both traditional Yòrùbá and Santeria practitioners. It is believed that such trees are the abode of ancient spirits. The presences of these spirits are recognized through abnormal growth or other curious. Trees that are enormous, that have intertwined trunks, that reside in unusual areas, or have odd appearances are utilized in rituals for the deities or to invoke particular events.⁷⁶ Water spirits are associated with seas, lagoons, lakes, springs, and the oceans.⁷⁷

Occurring within of these environs is any number of natural phenomena such as volcanoes, whirlpools, earthquakes, monsoons, drought etc. These events are believed to

⁷⁵ Awolalu, 49.
⁷⁶ Awolalu, 49.
⁷⁷ Awolalu, 47.
be caused by spiritual inhabitant. These are the reference from which Mendieta
developed the visual lexicon to maintain allusions to the Òrìṣà in her *Silueta Series*. 
Chapter 3

Allusions to the Òrìṣà in the Silueta Series

*My art is grounded in the belief in one universal energy which runs through everything: from insect to man, from man to spectre, from spectre to plant, from plant to galaxy.*

--Ana Mendieta, *Fuego de Tierra*, 1988

References to the Òrìṣà in Cuban modernism began in the early twentieth century when avant-garde artists, writers, musicians and intellectuals began to conflate Western, Hispanic, African and Amerindian elements in their quest for a Cuban identity (*cubanidad*). This quest attracted international attention in the Surrealist works of Wilfredo Lam (1902-1982) whose use of Òrìṣà motifs is the subject of several publications. His most famous painting *La Jungla* (*The Jungle*) (1943), now in the Museum of Modern Art, New York, shows fragmented female bodies amidst tobacco leaves and sugar cane that allude not only to the exploitation of black women during the colonial period of Cuban history, but also to the spirit of Afro-Cuba. As Herzberg points out, both the vegetation and the scissors motif in the *La Jungla* would seem to signify the act of cutting plants for ritual or medicinal purposes, reminding us of

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79 For a comprehensive bibliography, see Sims, *Wilfredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde*, 261-267.


Ọsanyin. In short, the quest for cubanidad led Mendieta to follow in the footsteps of Wilfredo Lam and Cuban modernists such as Manuel Mendive (b.1944) by referencing the Òrìṣà in her Siuetas. Lam's influence on her is evident in the monument entitled La Jungla (formerly titled Las Siete Potencias)\(^{82}\) that she designed to honor his memory in the MacArthur Park, Los Angeles, California.\(^{83}\) Unfortunately, she did not complete the project before her untimely death in 1985.

As mentioned earlier, Mendieta learned about Santeria from household maids in Cuba before leaving for the United States in 1961. According to curator Mary Jane Jacobs, she “reestablished contact with Santeria in the 1970’s, in part out of a personal nostalgia and in part as a means of binding herself in a deeper and more thoughtful way to her ancestors and ancestral land…”\(^{84}\) The fact that she consulted a babalawo during her visit to Cuba in 1980 reveals the extent of her identification with Yòrùbá cosmology, which postulates the existence of a universal enabling energy in nature or aṣe. Chances are, therefore, that some of her allusions to the Òrìṣà were deliberate (as indicated in their titles). Others might have been subconscious or intuitive, apparently stimulated by her exposure to Amerindian, Viennese Actionism, and the literature on ancient religions. This chapter will attempt to shed some light on these allusions with a view of enriching the discourse on the Silueta series.

\(^{83}\) Viso, 116.
In *On Giving Life*, 1975 (Figure 1), the artist placed a study skeleton in grass; the skull and hands of the skeleton were covered with pink plasticine giving the resemblance of flesh forming over bone. Mendieta rested her body atop of the skeleton and placed her mouth over the mouth of the skull. The implications of this image are: firstly, in order to sustain life, a life must be given; secondly, life can only come from that which is living; and thirdly, to live is to transform. Mendieta simulates mouth to mouth with the inert skeleton to transfer life, not necessarily her own, into the inanimate form. One might note the parallel between what Mendieta is demonstrating and the Yòrùbá myth of Ọbatala molding the human body over the skeleton fabricated by Ògún. After which, Ọlọdümárè gives the sculptured form vital breath (èmí). Breathing is the presence of a connection between ëmí and the body. According author and babalawo, Wande Abimbola, the vital breath is sometimes personified as female and “a daughter of Ọlọdümárè.”85 Thus, by breathing life into the skeleton Mendieta seems to be enacting the procreative powers of a female in the role as wife and mother.

The artist reconnects with the Earth as well as her heritage in *Imagen de Yagul* (1973) (Figure 2). In addition to evoking her personal regenerative powers, she calls attention to the process of reincarnation. Mendieta’s body is framed by what represents an oversized grave. The sides of the grave are made of large jagged rocks. She rests in the center of the grave; her body covered with white flowers reminiscent of spring’s first blossoms. From death springs forth life. The past recycles itself and offers new experiences and insight. This is why reincarnation is not necessarily circular in nature,

nor is it linear. If reincarnation is viewed from the perspective of Imagen de Yagul, it takes on the form of a spiral. After burial of the remains, the physical body becomes part of the earth and helps fertilize the landscape. It is during this moment of transformation that the soul will merge into a new experience.

The artist expressed that in this piece she “was covered by time and history.” Admittedly, the belief in life after death is universal; it is particularly strong in the Yorùbá tradition where death is not the end of life, but a departure to an afterlife from where the souls of the dead can be reborn to start a new life in the physical world. The Yorùbá, especially, often regard a child born soon after the death of a parent as a reincarnation of the deceased. The child is named “Babatunde” (Father comes again), if male, and “Yetunde” (Mother comes again), if female. The practice of dedicating altars to ancestors (antenna de Egun) in Santeria continues with this tradition in a creolized form. Thus, in Imagen de Yagul, Mendieta can be seen as using her body as a surrogate for Òrìṣà. She is both the matrix and flowers that grow from it. This matrix also implicates the fertilizing powers of Òrìṣà Oko whose counterpart in Santeria is St. Isidore, the patron saint of farmers.

The grave motif in Imagen de Yagul is significant in that it reminds us of Oya. She is also associated with death and rebirth as well as with the hidden powers of the female. Such a power enables Oya to compete favorably with the male Òrìṣà. As the
keeper of the cemetery, she protects and assists the dead. In spite of her aggressive nature, she is perceived as good-natured, beautiful and ever ready to assist humanity.  

As mentioned earlier, in a project, Mendieta removed the facial hair of a friend and glued it to her own face to form a beard in *Untitled (Facial Hair Transplants)*, 1972 (Figure 3). This too reminds the viewer of Oya’s physical appearance as, “The woman who grows a beard because of war.” It is uncertain whether Mendieta had Oya in mind during these performative self-portraits; however this piece brings to the forefront the symbols of veracity. Mendieta said of these works, “I like the idea of transferring hair from one person to another because I think it gives me that person’s strength.”  

Inherently, Oya possesses virile attributes demonstrated by her strength and tenacity. By adding hair to her own face, Mendieta imbues herself with the same attributes.  

In *Tree of Life*, 1976 (Figure 4), the artist poses in front of a tree with upraised hands, eyes closed and her body covered with grass and fresh mud. It is as though she is rising from the womb of the Earth in the form of a tree. The branches may very well represent the multiplicity of choices available to an individual in life which alludes to the assistance of Ọrunmila and Èṣù. Paths lead to the top of the tree, the back, or a change of heart could lead one to yet another space on the tree. Some decisions bare fruit while other will never bask in the light of the sun—at this point devotees employ the assistance of these deities. The gender of the earth element, female, is referenced with Mendieta’s appearance.

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89 Barnet, 55.  
Mendieta writes:

I have been carrying on a dialogue between the landscape and the female body (based on my own silhouette). I believe this to be a direct result of my having been torn away from my homeland during my adolescence. I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast 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.  

Once more there is a reference to ancestry. The tree is held in place by its roots, its connection to its mother or origins. It stands tall and has enjoyed a long productive life because of the lush area that fertilized one seed. From its connection with its ancestral pass or legacy, this tree carries on the legacy from which it was born. Mendieta did not have any children of her own; however, her legacy is her art, the medium by which she touched the hearts and souls of her contemporaries and generations since.

In *Incantation a Olokun-Yemaya*, 1977 (Figure 5), Mendieta uses sand to model a large hand on the beach. Resting in the palm of the hand is her silhouette. Like a babe protected by its mother, the silhouette is cradled in the powerful forces of Yemoja and Olókun. It is as though she is in the process of reestablishing “the bonds that [united her] to the universe [and returning] to the maternal source.” As mentioned in the last chapter, the Yoruba believe that the first land emerged out of Olokun (the primordial waters); land and sea are two aspects of the same maternal principle. This piece references the Earth and humanity. Though the silhouette is recognized as feminine because it is based on Mendieta’s contours, the silhouette is also androgynous. It contains no other indications

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91 Brett, 181.
of being entirely male or female; this leaves room for the silhouette to be interpreted as a symbol utilized to represent the human race. Olókun’s oceans cover the majority of the world. More areas are covered by smaller bodies of water; and microscopic water droplets create humidity in the atmosphere. Not only is Mendieta cradled by the hand of Olókun, the entire world is held in the powerful yet tender grip of this majestic deity.

*Untitled (Ochún)*, 1981, (Figure 6) is a direct reference to the deity Ọsún. Mendieta molded curvilinear lines to form the outline of an hourglass shape silhouette in the shallow waters of a beach in Miami. Seawater was able to flow through the openings at both ends of the silhouette creating a river like image. The sand mounds juxtaposed against the water in the center is reminiscent of the shape of an island and references Cuba. The patron saint of Cuba is Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre, who is equated with Ọsún. Mendieta had already begun to travel to Cuba by the time she created this *Silueta*. This work was created with fondness and respect to Cuba. Readings of social justices can also be found her with knowledge of this deities attributes. According to Joseph Murphy and Mei-Mei Sanford:

Osun’s name means source. It is related to the word orisun, the source of a river, a people, or of children. The word Osun can be glossed as that which runs, seeps, flows, moves, as water does. Osun is the perpetually renewing source of life…the appearance of sweet water from dry ground, a mode of hope and agency in new and difficult situations, a

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92 Viso, 93.
93 Variations exist such as “Charitable Virgin of El Cobre”.
way out of no way that has made life possible for her devotees in West Africa and the Americas.\textsuperscript{94}

In Cuban Santeria, Osún is better known for her elegance. Yet, Miguel Ramos points out:

In spite of her apparent hedonistic nature, Oshun represents the suffering of womankind [and] is reputed to defend her daughters from the abuse of mankind, often attacking men where it hurts most! Oshun laughs when she is annoyed, and cries when she is content. Her honey can be delightfully sweet, but at the slightest offense she can covert it into an extremely bitter purge. In a similar fashion, she rewards the righteous by “sweetening” their lives, and punishes the evil by making every aspect of their existence as bitter as she can.\textsuperscript{95}

In view of her readiness to fight for women’s rights and social justice, in general, Osun has been described as an epitome of "humanistic feminism."\textsuperscript{96}

Ánima, Silueta de Cohetes (Soul, Silhouette of Fireworks), 1976 (Figure 7) is one of Mendieta’s most jubilant depictions of living and the joy that resides within the heart of a woman. In the filming of Anima, the silhouette is juxtaposed against dusk. The fireworks are lit, creating absolute light against the growing darkness. The wind blows for a moment, then the atmosphere remains still, only seconds later, the wind stirs. Smoke


\textsuperscript{95} Ramos, 69.

and flames are blown until the hands, feet, and heart center are bright. The last flames to be quenched by the wind are those of the heart center. The heart, the house of the soul (émi), remains the most resistant to fading. The silhouette is then enveloped in darkness, as too the soul is cloaked in the unknown of the afterlife. This is not a sad going away, however. The inclusion of fireworks signifies the émi, the animated soul. The final images of *Anima1976: Fireworks Silhouette Series* are poignant, as they speak to the delicate balance between life and death, and the symbiotic relationship that maintains that balance.

Created in 1972, *Untitled (Death of a Chicken)* (Figure 8) is from a silent film, two minutes long. In the film, a hen is placed on the chopping block and then decapitated. A nude Mendieta grabs the hen by the feet while its wings flap vigorously. She definitely took artistic liberties in creating this piece. Though she had not personally witnessed animal sacrifices in Santeria ceremonies, she had heard stories in her youth about the practice. She was more accustomed to the general killing of animals for food, however. In Santeria, sacrifice signifies a ritual exchange in which the life of an animal metaphorically becomes a substitute for that of a supplicant. In other words, blood is the most sacred sacrifice that can be made in any ritual transaction between the human and the sublime. The Òrìṣà can be placated with other substances such as alcohol, fruits, flowers, and money. However, to overcome great hurdles, a blood sacrifice is usually required. Needless, to say, the type of animal sacrificed depends on the needs of the supplicant. For instance, while blood may revitalize the symbol of an Òrìṣà, the fluid of a snail or palm-oil, may be used to cool the temperament of an aggressive deity such as
Ôgún. Mendieta would seem to be very much aware of the potency of blood at this point and understood how its usage brought life to any work—this she learned from Viennese Actionism. Hence she frequently used it in performances, occasionally substituting red tempera.

In her 1972 performance *Bird Transformation* (Figure 9), Mendieta glued white chicken feathers to a female model’s body. In another work *Ocean Bird Washup*, 1974 (Figure 11) created in Mexico, she covered her own body with poultry feathers, which drifted with the waves until it was eventually washed up on the beach of La Ventosa in Salina Cruz, Mexico. Given the frequent sacrifice of the rooster in Santeria, Mary Jane Jacob suggests that “Mendieta became the sacrificial rooster” in *Bird Transformation*.97

Conscious of bird motifs in other world religions that might have influenced Mendieta, Herzberg, on the other hand, argues that

The associations [bird imagery] do not seem to be limited to pre-Columbian art or contemporary transcultural accounts, but probably include other ancient cultures as well: considering the many half-bird and winged figures in Egyptian art, it is perhaps significant that Mendieta reconfigured the Egyptian art chapter of an old textbook by pasting her own head over each of the Egyptian figures in the illustration.98

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97 Jacob, 10.
98 Herzberg, 164.
Further complicating the interpretation of this motif is the suggestion by Raquelín (Mendieta’s sister) that, in spite of “using poultry feathers…Mendieta actually considered the figure to represent a white bird, not a chicken.”

A close analysis of the bird motif in Yorùbá cosmology may shed more light on the subject. The motif features prominently in Yorùbá art because of its generic association with aṣe. Because the bird inhabits both land and sky, its artistic representation is often used to mediate between the human and spirit worlds. Furthermore, Ọlódùmàré reportedly gave the first female deity a special aṣe (in the form of a bird enclosed in a calabash) to reinforce her procreative potential, and to enable her to assert her rights, especially among the male deities. She is said to have used this female aṣe so effectively that the male deities were obliged to reckon with her. As a result, powerful Yorùbá women (àjé) are thought to possess a similar aṣe, which they can use for positive or negative purposes. It is interesting to note that winged females frequently appear in Wilfredo Lam’s painting that implicate the Òrìṣà, which seems to support Raquelin Mendieta’s contention that her sister’s Bird Transformation may signify much more than “a sacrificial rooster.” In effect, any interpretation of the bird motif

99 Herzberg, 164.
101 See, for instance, his La Manana (The Green Morning, 1943) depicts a winged female standing beside an offering, which Esu, the divine messenger, is expected to transport to heaven. As Julia Herzberg rightly observes, the presence of Esu in the painting “is signified by the little round head surmounting the central head of the winged figure.” See Herzberg, “Rereading Lam,” 156.
in her works must recognize the significations in Yorùbá cosmology as well, even if it is not possible yet to establish a direct connection.\(^\text{102}\)

Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to show that while Ana Mendieta was influenced by Conceptual, Minimalist, feminist and performance art she openly appropriated iconographical references from the cosmologies of ancient religions, particularly the Òrìṣà traditions of the Afro-Cuban religion of Santeria. Her upbringing as a Catholic did not prevent her from referring to Cuban myths in her works, for as an artist she realized there was a great wealth of intrinsic symbolism and creative inspiration in cultural mythos.

As author Miguel Barnet has observed, most of these myths are African in origin and can be traced to black slaves:

They [are stories] of the deities’ adventures, everyday pursuits, festivities, fraternal and sexual relationships, conflicts and other matters. Their purpose is to explain the rituals in which these events appear… These myths—now transculturated—have been preserved in almost all the religions of African origin that are practiced throughout the country. They have a universal appeal.¹⁰³

Santeria rituals have since been creolized to reflect the cultural diversity of Cuba. This phenomenon has led scholar Isabel Castellanos to declare that “Santeria is not an African

¹⁰³ Barnet, 3.
religion exported to Cuba, but an *Afro-Cuban* faith. Being a product of intense transculturation, it is to be found at the root of many aspects of contemporary Cuban society: music, literature, and art.\(^{104}\)

Mendieta may not have realized the multitude of references to the deities that appear in her works at the time she created the *Silueta Series*. This point is what makes her works so awe-inspiring. Allusions to the Òrìṣà are inconspicuous in her art. Even when the name of the deity is included in the title, the image itself does not overtly implicate the multitude of meanings that are present. The series relays the story of a being tracing his/her connection to the source of creation while engaging the aṣe that permeates all of creation. Constantly, the impermanent, yet, ever evolving nature of the physical world appears in the dialogue between the work and the viewer.

A complete awareness of the Òrìṣà is not a requirement in order to experience or recognize every aspect of their presence in this body of works. As it has been pointed out, the Òrìṣà assist humans in the experience of living; this assistance is rarely an obvious act, and, oftentimes devotees are awestruck at the subtlety used by the deities in making their presence known. In a manner of speaking, these powerful and complex supernatural beings are masked by simplicity. However, extracting broader readings form the artist’s oeuvre is not immediate. Meanings based on Òrìṣà iconography does not suddenly appear, however this happens over the course of time. In this manner the *Siluetas*

continue to engage the viewer with new additions to previous interactions; therefore these works remain fresh.

The readings of this thesis have been extrapolated out a tradition that emphasizes the *journey* to self awareness more so than the end result. Yòrùbá philosophy is not exclusive; therefore, the readings of the Siluetas will continue to be open-ended just as Mendieta had desired. The fact that so much can be pulled from Mendieta’s art, of course speaks to the magnitude of her knowledgebase; versatility is reflected not only in her choice of materials, but also in the uncanny ways she used them to participate in the dialogue initiated by the art movements of her time. In addition she bypassed the boundaries established by such contemporary art movements by addressing the issues of heritage, cultural identity, and gender relations through the insertion of her own body.

Mendieta’s use of ephemeral materials as form straddles the line between the mythic and prosaic. Her body experienced a metamorphosis in each of her silhouettes due to the changing of environs; therefore she became a living formal attribute. This too contributes broader perspectives in the series: some of the images appear memorial-like, relating her childhood in Cuba to her maturity as an artist in the United States. Indeed, one is tempted to interpret the recent resurgence of scholarly interest in her works as a kind of reincarnation. However, the attention serves as a source of inspiration for many artists both in Cuba and the United States. Mendieta stated, “The function of the artist is not a gift but a commitment;”¹⁰⁵ thus, the commitment to her work is part of the rousing legacy her presence contributed to contemporary art.

¹⁰⁵ Viso, 239.
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APPENDIX A

Yòrùbá Pronunciation Key
Yòrùbá Pronunciation Key

Yòrùbá is a tonal language that consists of three (3) tones: low, mid, and high.

**Yòrùbá tones:** do – ò, re – o, mi – ó (respectively)

The Yòrùbá alphabet consists of 25 letters with the exclusion of the letters c, q, v, x, and z. The Yòrùbá alphabet includes the additions of the letters ‘ɛ’, ‘gb’, ‘ọ’, and ‘ṣ’.

**Yòrùbá Alphabet:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>E</th>
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<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>GB</td>
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<td>J</td>
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<td>P</td>
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<td>S</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ṣ</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Y</td>
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Pronunciations of Yòrùbá vowels are as follows:

A – ah as in father
E – ay as in way
Ẹ – eh as in wet or egg
I – ee as in we
Ọ – oh as in old
Ọ – aw as in law
U – oo as in boot

In Yòrùbá, there are special consonant sounds for the letters “gb”, “p”, “ṣ”.

Gb – bag boy (plosive, voiced); the ‘gb’ would be pronounced together to fill the cheeks with air as the ‘b’ sound is being pronounced. The emphasis should be placed on the ‘b’ sound and not the ‘g’. This may take some practice to understand the formation of this consonant.
P – backpack; like the ‘gb’ sound, the Yorùbá ‘p’ is also plosive, but not voiced. Unlike some other languages found on the continent of Africa, Yorùbá only has one ‘p’ sound. Again, the cheeks would be filled with air in order to pronounce the plosive ‘p’ sound. This will also take practice.

Ṣ – sh as in sheet.
APPENDIX B

Images
Figure 1

*On Giving Life*, 1975
Lifetime color photograph
8x10 in (20.3x25.4 cm)
Private Collection
Original documentation: 35 mm color slide
Figure 2

Imagen de Yagul (*Image from Yagul*), 1973
Lifetime color photograph
20x13 ¼ in (50.8x33.7 cm)
Collection Hans Breder
Figure 3

*Untitled (Facial Hair Transplants)*, 1972
35 mm color slides
Figure 4

Tree of Life, 1976 (detail)
Collection Raquelín Mendieta Family Trust
35 mm color slide
Figure 5

*Incantation a Olokun-Yemaya, 1977*

Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection
Figure 6

*Untitled (Ochún)*, 1981
35 mm color-slide
Figure 7

Anima, Silueta de Cohetes (Soul, Silhouette of Fireworks), 1976
35mm color slide
Figure 8

*Untitled (Death of a Chicken)*, 1972
35mm color slides
Other documentation: *Untitled (Chicken Piece)*, 1972
Super-8 color; silent film
Figure 9

*Bird Transformation*, 1972
Lifetime color photograph
10 x 8 in (25.4 x 20.3 cm)
Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT, Contemporary Art Purchase Fund
Figure 10

*Ocean Bird Washup*, 1974
Still from Super-8 color, silent film, 4 min. 30
LaTricia M. January was born in 1974 in Richmond, Virginia. Her academic career has been based on performing/visual arts and cultural studies; she received her Bachelor’s in General Studies (now Interdisciplinary Studies) from Virginia Commonwealth University. As of February 2007, Ms. January completed a year long internship at the National Museum of African Art where she composed the finding aid that accompanies the *Henry John Drewal and Margaret Thompson Drewal Slide Collection* housed in the Elliot Elisofon Photographic Archives.