

From: *Ana Mendieta. She Got Love*, curated by B. Merz, O. Gambari, exhibition catalog (Rivoli-Torino, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 29 January - 16 June 2013), Skira, Milano 2013, pp. 58-66.

En el tronco de un árbol vive Ana

Raquel Cecilia Mendieta

Retracing my aunt, Ana's, footsteps became a sort of pilgrimage as soon as I came to Rome. Walking through the cobbled streets I wondered how many times had she done the same – how many times had her feet struck the same stone, the same stairwell that led from The American Academy to Trastevere.

I was aware of Ana's love for Rome – from reading her letters and talking to people who were close to her back in New York. But I wasn't prepared for what would happen next. How the same city would entice me, would make me feel like Ana's presence still lingered in places like the restaurant near the Pantheon that she frequented and the print shop where she created the book Romolo Bulla printed. And ever more surprising was the open arms of the friends she had left behind. Some of the people I would meet had only known Ana a short while and yet she had left a mark on them, she had entered their hearts and now they were more than willing to share their memories with me almost 30 years later.

At The American Academy I spoke with Pina Pasquantonio – who is now the Assistant to the Director of Operations – of how Ana loved to explore Italy in her Volkswagen. She told me how Ana confided that she struggled with the floor pieces because they were so delicate and continued to break and how it took several attempts before she mastered the technique which enabled the pieces to form firmly. This was her second attempt to create floor pieces, as she had done the same in New York before leaving for Rome with similar challenges. Pina helped further by reaching out to several people I had been trying to connect with. Amongst these was a gardener, Giovanni Cimarone, who still works at The American Academy, who vividly remembers hauling a fallen dead tree to Ana's studio so she could create an artwork with it. The tree had fallen by the little house she rented and she wanted to use it because it had a special meaning to her. He remembered it becoming like the shape of a canoe after she carved it.

My first steps towards her studio at The American Academy – the one where she planned to stay – was where I realized this was more than a pilgrimage to me. It was a part of history. And it was more than art history. It was my history – my family's history.

In an interview with art historian Joan Marter, Ana said, "I am very interested in history. I think that culture is the memory of history". History fascinated Ana, which was another reason why she loved Rome so much. And I was beginning to see how she came to this as I followed the path that led to her studio – Casa Rustica at The Academy. This was the place where she created her final works – the wood with burned images and the trunks, which were carved and burned with gunpowder.

One of the recurring themes in Ana's works is *The Tree of Life*. This is a theme, which can be traced to her early well-known work created in Iowa where she covered herself in mud and stood against a large tree. Through the years she returned to this theme as she herself mentions in several lectures and her last interview with art historian Joan Marter. "My work has underlying themes that I keep doing over the years. One of them is the tree of life... the body and a tree together." My mother,

Raquelín Mendieta recounted to me how she, Ana and their cousins would sing a song when they were children while acting out the lyrics of the song. The song is about a little girl who carves her name in the trunk of a tree. The tree is moved and gives a flower to the girl. Ana would be the one who would carve her name in her cousin's stomach who was acting as the tree with her arms outstretched while my mother would sing the song. These are the thoughts that tumbled through my head as I walked the path up to her studio. My goal in Rome was to find out as much as I could about the last four trunks she had created here.

During my research for the film I was making about Ana's last years and her transition to creating permanent objects I came upon a letter in which Carla Stellweg, then her gallerist, mentions a "shield project" which Ana was working on. There are no known shield projects from this late time period (the only shield project we know about was created at The Lowe Museum in Miami in 1982), the letter is dated November 1984 and I asked Carla if she remembered what project this was but she did not. I then came across part of a poem she had been writing:

"I will go on looking for shields (*corazas*). Made out of solid stone, part of the foreign world of protection. I cannot forgive you my love for your poverty of being, for your incapacity to give roots to my dreams, to give ground to our future."

It could not be an accident that I had discovered two different references to shields. And this was further proven when I found a red folder of hers marked *Shield Projects* which had proposals for *Tree of Life* works in different public places – none of them realized.

My pilgrimage in Rome led me to the artist Nunzio Di Stefano who told me how he had given Ana two pieces of *tiglio* (linden) wood because she was interested in working with them. He told me that the wood is quite soft and easily burns. I knew as soon as he showed me the stacks of other similar planks that these must have been the first wood slabs she burned leaf shapes into with gunpowder. This led me all the way to Villa Sant'Angelo the small town that had been devastated by a recent quake. But that didn't stop the artist Pasquale Liberatore from inviting me to his temporary home for a traditional Italian lunch with his family. It was here that I learned about the first trunk Ana created. It was made from a dead tree that had been cut because of parasites that had attacked the tree from the inside. It was an elm tree. An elm tree is associated with strength and considered sacred in Italy.

Pasquale told me the elm tree is very important in his region because it has been connected with sacrifices. He did not remember if he had told Ana about this. At first Ana had the trunk lying horizontally while deciding how to shape it, but then changed her mind and stood it upright. He told me in great detail how they had hollowed out the tree and then shaped it like a person. And hidden inside the trunk they created a handle. Which made the work become like a shield. "The skin of the tree would be like a protection to her body", he explained. But I knew there was no handle in this work when it was found in her studio after her death. How did this come to be? Pasquale never saw her burn anything into the trunk. Carl Andre came and strapped it to the top of Ana's car and transported it back to her studio in Rome. Pasquale never saw Ana again. This was in the spring of 1985.

I met with Romolo Bulla the printer who told me how the idea for the book *Pietre Foglie* was inspired and how Ana worked arranging and rearranging leaves she had gathered at The American Academy – probably near her studio. I spoke with art historian Ester Coen who talked about visiting Ana's studio and remembered how Ana told her how the hollowing of the trunks was like finding the womb or experiencing the womb. And then Ester asked if I had found Carmine Tornincasa yet. I told her I did not know who this was. She told me he was an artist who at the time was a young student at the University in L'Aquila and had been Ana's assistant. He had helped Ana and Pasquale in Villa Sant'Angelo and then Ana in Rome. I was more than surprised to hear this. It seemed

almost unbelievable – how could this important piece of information have been undiscovered for so many years? Ester picked up the phone and called Carmine – she knew him because he had also worked as an assistant to Nunzio at one time.

When I saw Ida Panicelli, art critic, she told me how she came to Ana's studio after she had died and discovered life springing from a cactus sprout that was growing from a wax mold Ana had been experimenting with. Ida called Carmine for me and he confirmed that he had worked with Ana the last summer before she died. I made arrangements with him to meet in Padua. As I drove away from Rome I felt overcome by a sudden sadness. There was so much I hadn't seen or explored. And then there was Ana. The Ana who was left in Rome – in the memories of her friends and in the places she loved. I longed to stay in these places and with these people because through them Ana was alive. But I knew that we had to find Carmine and learn about the trunks and as we drove on the Autostrada I was reminded that we were still on our pilgrimage when we saw a truck pass by us with a sign that read "Pietre Foglie".

In Padua I learned about Ana's final works. How Ana had hired Carmine to be her assistant in Rome at her studio and how together they hollowed out the trunks and prepared them for burning. The first two trunks, the elm tree from Villa Sant'Angelo, had been cut in half and created the first two trunk pieces. The second tree, from the grounds of The American Academy, was cut in half and became the third and fourth trunk pieces. The tree from The Academy was a platano (sycamore) tree like the ones that line the Tiber River. Ana had continued to use nature from an area that was important to her but was now bringing nature into the studio.

He told me how she burned shapes into the trunks using gunpowder and how he was supposed to travel with her to Los Angeles to create similar trunks at MacArthur Park. I asked Carmine about the shields and the missing handle. He confirmed that they had created a handle on the first trunk in Pasquale's studio but that Ana had cut it off. I asked him whose idea it was to create the handle, "it was Ana's idea to make the handle and Ana's idea to cut it off," he replied. I asked him if he remembered why she chose to do so and he said that she realized it wasn't necessary. He told me that Ana knew exactly what she wanted. That she was used to defending herself. When I spoke about the trunks, these shields, a sudden burst of emotion welled up from within me and I had to leave the interview for a moment. Not only was this project never fulfilled, but also more importantly, these shields did not protect Ana and we had lost her. I had hoped to uncover myths about my aunt and to discover what had inspired her here in Italy. In the end, although I learned more than I had thought possible, after so many years had passed, what stays with me most is my realization that some myths are impossible to demystify or unravel. Especially when it concerns someone like Ana, who a friend in Italy described as "a work of art herself". Ana will remain, like her beloved city Rome, eternal through the art that she left behind.

En el tronco de un árbol una niña
grabó su nombre enchida de placer
Y el árbol conmovido allá en su seno
A la niña una flor dejó caer.
Yo soy el árbol conmovido y triste
tu eres la niña que mi tronco hirió
yo guardo siempre tu querido nombre
y tú, que has hecho de mi pobre flor?
Eusebio Delfín