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Hannah Wilke, 52 Artist, Dies; Used Female Body as Her Subject

Roberta Smith

Hannah Wilke, a sculptor and Conceptual artist who made the body and female sexuality the subject of her work, died yesterday at Twelve Oaks Hospital in Houston. She was 52 and lived in Manhattan.

She died of complications from lymphoma, said her husband, Donald Goddard.

In the late 1960's and early 70's, Ms. Wilke startled the art world with beautiful sculptures made of latex or ceramic whose layered and folded flowerlike forms were both abstract and yet highly suggestive of female genitalia. This fortune-cookie-like configuration became the artist's signature; it was sometimes small and made of homey materials like chewing gum or laundry lint, or it could be larger and painted with Abstract Expressionist brushstrokes. These forms could hang on the wall, or be marshaled in great numbers across the floor, or be stuck directly to the body of the artist herself, as they were in some of her Conceptual photographic pieces.

In some ways, Ms. Wilke was part of the Post-Minimalist soft-sculpture esthetic that emerged in the early 1970's and that included artists like Eva Hesse and Keith Sonnier. But she brought to this esthetic a stronger sense of the erotic and an often witty political edge. Striking in appearance, she forthrightly made herself the primary subject of her videotapes, performance pieces and photographs, often posing nude or partially clothed in ways that ridiculed the role of the female nude in art. While some critics called her work narcissistic, others saw it as probing the mechanism of narcissism and voyeurism.

In the late 1970's, Ms. Wilke's involvement with the female body became even more personal when her mother contracted cancer and the artist began to photograph the physical ravages of the disease and its treatments. In 1986, when cancer was diagnosed in Ms. Wilke, she began a series of daily watercolor drawings of her face, her hands or flowers. With the help of her husband, she also turned the camera on herself, documenting her illness in a series of large-scale color photographs.

Ms. Wilke, whose original name was Arlene Hannah Butter, was born in New York City on March 7, 1940. She earned a bachelor of fine arts degree and a teaching certificate from the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia in 1962 and taught sculpture at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan for many years. Since her first one-woman exhibition in 1972, she has been represented by the Ronald Feldman Gallery in Manhattan.

Her work is represented in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Jewish Museum in New York City, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, the Milwaukee Art Museum, and the Allen Art Museum in Oberlin, Ohio. A retrospective of her career was organized at the University of Missouri at St. Louis in 1989.

In addition to her husband, she is survived by a Sister, Marsie Scharlatt of Los Angeles, and two stepdaughters, Katie Goddard of Minneapolis and Nellie Goddard of Chicago.