

Arts and entertainment

Art

A woman's place

Wilke's art carves its own feminine niche

Hannah Wilke: Past and Present, sculpture, photographs, and watercolors, at the Genovese Gallery, 535 Albany St., through Nov. 1.

by Cate McQuaid

"Hannah Wilke: Past and Present," a small retrospective exhibition at the Genovese Gallery, is an unflinching examination of womanhood: the ways we batter ourselves, our strengths, our vulnerabilities. Every piece in the exhibit defies the established male viewpoint of what a woman is or should be and fights to open up and inhabit a new understanding of womanhood.

In truth, it isn't a *new* understanding. It is one that until now has not been articulated or envisioned in a woman's words and images, untainted by male society's definition of woman. And this understanding isn't better or worse than the traditional take on the relationship between women and men. It is just different, frightening because it is unknown, and true right down to the marrow.

One of Wilke's precepts precedes a relationship to men: a woman's relationship to her own body and desires does not have to always reflect or accommodate a man. It is its own self, valid and real, earthy and delightful and annoying, before any man (or partner of either sex) enters the picture.

The artist's early pieces are conceptual and make great use of chewing gum. Wilke creates tiny sculptures shaped like vulvas or flesh wounds and affixes them

to her face and bare torso in a series of black and white photographs. Some of the poses are comic: she wears a fat tie, or plays with a hat and dark glasses. Some are exaggerated sexual poses you might find in *Playboy*, and the effect is jarring: here is a woman playing into this hackneyed, damaging image of womanhood, but still the truth is right there on the surface of her skin in the form of small wads of gum. And here the truth has many garbs: as vulva, a quiet badge of a woman's private, internal experience of herself; or as small multiple wounds suffered as she tries to fit herself into the hurtful, pre-ordained shape of a *Playboy* bunny.

Wilke again makes use of the organic, labial shape in her "Generation Process Series." These four collections of mollusk-like shapes, brightly painted on bright fields, some speckled with color on clean fields, some on mottled fields, are all clean and beautifully presented, like small trophies. Each echoes the vulva, folded in on itself, dark and mysterious inside, maybe hollow. It's a great, subtle presentation. Phallic representations and round empty wombs are a dime a dozen, but artistic representations of female genitals are rare. And the "Generation Process Series" has delightful, toy-like vulva shapes, bright like wrapping paper, calling to be touched. It's wonderful.

Wilke also examines her relationship with her mother, and with disease. The "Seura Chaya" series is a group of photographs of the artist's mother after her



FAMILY SNAPSHOTS: "Seura Chaya #1," 1978-89, a mixed media study of Hannah Wilke's mother, Selma Butter. (Lisa Kahane photo)

mastectomy. Chemotherapy has left her without hair. She poses for Wilke, sitting on a couch, looking coyly at the camera over her bare shoulder; or in her bra, fussing with her wig before she puts it on; or tucked like a child into bed, the covers pulled to her chin. Wilke shows a sympathy for her mother that many daughters take a lifetime to achieve; these photos don't catch their subject as a mother, but as a human, sad and strong and vulnerable all at once.

Each of the photos is underlined with four expressionistic watercolors of a bird,

quivering images that almost resemble the artist's mother, but also evoke her spirit.

Wilke's diptych, titled "So Help Me Hannah Series: Portrait of the Artist with her Mother Selma Butter," is two full-color photos of the women bare breasted. The daughter wears eye shadow and blush; she is full, unmarked and beautiful, gazing into the camera with a dare in her eyes. Beside her, her mother turns her eyes away from us. Her neck is gaunt and frail, her left breast gone, leaving a

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blank chest red with lacerations. This piece directly recalls the chewing gum series, placing a male fantasy beside a woman who wears her scars with both humility and a degree of shame.

Wilke's most recent work is the "About Face Series," a number of deftly painted expressionistic faces. These are like ghost faces, eyeless and gaunt, barely discernible in the swift strokes of a thick, drying paint brush. These later works transcend the anger of her earlier pieces. They are not as earthy as the chewing gum series, or the "So Help Me Hannah..." series, but quieter, deeper, and more spiritual.

The "Seura Chaya" bird shows up again in "Transfiguration," a 1989 series of 18 drawings that begins with birds nesting. "Out of my head the space between the brush strokes the birds can get out of my brain and come back clean," Wilke writes in the third panel. These birds are like ideas, but more than that—they are alive, inhabitants of the self that the artist needs to let loose. And she does: they escape from her mouth, from her nose, from every bodily orifice. There is one jubilant drawing of the artist with her arms raised to a flock of birds, rejoicing in their escape from the confines of her intellect out into the world. Wilke has shared this flock with us in her show at the Genovese Gallery, and that's something to celebrate.