

## Hannah Wilke

### SANTA MONICA MUSEUM OF ART

**N**arcissism is the critical complaint that has plagued Hannah Wilke's work since the 1970s, when the late artist flaunted her considerable beauty in nude photographs, labeling herself a Super-tart or sprinkling her body with wads of bubble gum shaped like female genitalia.

But that charge became less accurate when Wilke documented her battle with cancer for two and a half years before her death in 1993. The resulting work, surveyed in the exhibition "Intra-Venus," pits the horrors of disease against the resilience of the human spirit and reaches beyond one woman's pain.

Once again, Wilke's body is on display. When her long, dark hair falls out, she arranges masses of it on sheets of watercolor paper in poignant works called "Brushstrokes." When her hands become discolored from intravenous feedings, she paints her ravaged flesh in glorious color. *October 21, 1991: Hand #3* is a precise delineation of the effects of treatment. Bandages, lead radiation blocks, medicine bottles, and syringes become components of less successful sculpture.

Most strikingly—with the help of her husband, Donald Goddard, who photographed her—Wilke records her descent in a series of larger-than-life-size color photographs. The images, ranging from the horrible to the beatific, present the human body as a vulnerable shell that cannot protect passion or sustain a will to live. With these photographs, Wilke shows that beauty is no defense against death, nor is it the point of her art. S. M.



DENNIS COMLEY

**Hannah Wilke, *October 21, 1991: Hand #3*, 1991, watercolor on paper, 14½" x 17½". Santa Monica Museum of Art.**