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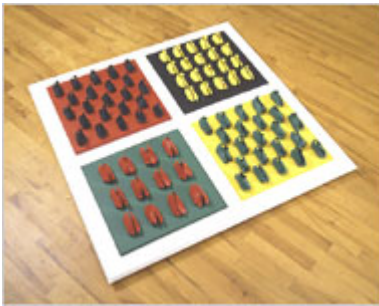
ART REVIEW

An Artist's Roots in Sculpture, Reclaimed

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“Hannah Wilke: Gestures,” at the [Neuberger Museum of Art](#), is a complex exhibition with a simple point: that Ms. Wilke’s roots and practice as a sculptor have been largely forgotten, replaced by a narrow view of her work as a photographer and performance artist.



FOURSQUARE Hannah Wilke’s “Geo-Logic 4 to One,” from the “Generation Process” series (1980-82), in which Ms. Wilke used color to dramatic effect.

It is not entirely clear how this historical oversight happened, though Tracy Fitzpatrick, the exhibition curator, has a theory: the widespread display and dispersal of reproductions of Ms. Wilke’s photographs, stripped from their original context, perpetrated a condensed vision of her art.

The exhibition puts sculpture back in the picture, beginning with a concentrated look at early, little-known clay pieces by Ms. Wilke (1940-1993). Among the displays are several of her small, fragile clay forms in the shape of female genitalia.

Produced in the early 1960s, these sculptures represent some of the first explicit vaginal imagery arising from the feminist art movement. Ms. Wilke was not just an experimental artist, but a feminist pioneer.

Further displays show that Ms. Wilke worked with clay throughout her career, but she also experimented with other sculptural materials. There are sculptures

made of latex, wax, cookie dough, erasers, chewing gum, Play-Doh — even laundry lint.

All the materials are malleable, and all her sculptures are based on a specific method of folding, through which she turns flat, surfaces into three-dimensional vessels. The final shapes have vaginal connotations of varying degrees. Sometimes the forms are laid out along the floor in a line or arranged in a grid, but beyond the momentary delight of discovering a work's unexpected material, the shapes can all start to get monotonous.

Ms. Wilke was aware of this concern. Her roots as a sculptor lie in minimalism, but she never wanted to be associated with the minimalists, who prized standardized geometric shapes and forms. Her sculptures, she argued, were different insofar as each of them was unique.

She also employed color to dramatic effect. Some of her folds are painted in bright primary and secondary colors, while others, like the "Generation Process" series from 1982, are spattered and flecked with paint. The point was to make each one different, to give it a personality. Among the hundreds of folds in this show, no two are the same.

Most probably, the choice of colors was also deeply personal. Nine ceramic folds titled "Blue Skies," begun in 1987 but completed shortly before her death six years later from lymphoma, are dark and bleak — a mess of swirls of blue and white on a black field.

Given her work with body imagery, it was inevitable perhaps that Ms. Wilke should also begin to work with her own body. In her 1974 video "Gestures," shown here, we see her using her skin as a sculptural material as she slowly kneads and pulls at her face.

This led to other videos and photographs of herself, usually in the nude, the most important and best known of which are the photographic body-art pieces from the "S.O.S-Starification Object Series," begun 1974, in which she merged sculpture and her body by creating little vulva-like sculptures out of chewing gum which she then stuck all over herself.

One image from the "S.O.S" series is here. It shows the artist, naked to the waist, a veil wrapped about her head, her face and body covered in the chewing-gum sculptures, which look like hives or welts, or even some kind of painful tribal scarification.

The display could have included more than one of these works, along with other examples of the artist's body-art photography and video. (I am thinking of the photographs of Ms. Wilke in pin-up poses.) But given the show's ambition to resurrect her sculpture, it is understandable that the curator has sought to minimize the inclusion of this line of work.

Over all, this show is not so much a retrospective as a kind of art history search-and-rescue project. It is not easy to experience or even to like, given the confrontational, repetitive use of female sexuality. But in earnestness and for art historical purpose, "Hannah Wilke: Gestures" sets a standard to which most museum shows don't even bother to aspire.

"Hannah Wilke: Gestures," Neuberger Museum of Art, 735 Anderson Hill Road, Purchase, through Jan. 25. Information: www.neuberger.org or (914) 251-6100