

Hannah Wilke

Early Drawings

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts
31 Mercer Street
SoHo
Through Saturday

Before Hannah Wilke became Hannah Wilke, feminist provocateur with a camera (and gum or ceramic vulvas in a range of sizes), she was a spirited, often wicked draftswoman. This informative exhibition features 49 of her early efforts on paper, mostly from the 1960s, but also the '70s. Beginning with works in ink and charcoal that mine the vocabulary of Abstract Expressionism with increasingly emphatic marks and shapes, these drawings constantly flirt with sexual suggestion.

Strong color seems to encourage the tendency, and by the mid-'60s, a series of pastel and graphite works features satiric phalluses, saturated tones and a thinly disguised glee. Among the strongest images are several pastels from 1964 that take things a step further into symmetrical forms that seem to conflate torsos, faces and internal organs into monumental masklike arrangements.

One can imagine Ms. Wilke being inspired first by the brooding reliefs of Lee Bontecou and then the early paintings of Eva Hesse or perhaps the more obstreperous sexuality of Lee Lozano's cartoonish depictions of brightly colored tools. Whatever the course of influence, there is surely a drawing exhibition to be done focusing on these four artists.

Ms. Wilke also had a penchant for refinement and explicit autobiographical references. Both tendencies comes out in the drawing "This Was Once My Mother's Plate" from the mid-'60s, and in "Left-Wing Angel," a delicately rendered portrait of herself with angel wings, from 1976.

In the early '90s, after Wilke had documented her mother's fight with cancer in numerous large photographs, she also recorded unstintingly her own battle with the same disease. But the earlier image of her angelic self assumed a life of its own after she died in 1993, at 52. It is engraved on her tombstone.

ROBERTA SMITH