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Nancy Goldring

Hannah Wilke: Early Drawings at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

Recent criticism has focused primarily on the late Hannah Wilke's fearlessly self-referential photographic work. The 50 drawings currently on view at the Ronald Feldman Gallery, serve to flesh out the later dramatic performative images to reveal a larger artistic force. Wilke emerges from this show a playful, inventive, and sensual draftsman – and someone for whom drawing was a necessary part of her art-making.

The wide range in the drawings on view reflects the experimental nature of a young artist as well as a youthful susceptibility to current stylistic tendencies, from the gentle pop ironies of the bright polymorphous penile shapes to the scruffy seductive marks that read as little pubic tufts, forms characteristic of an abstract expressionist vocabulary. All together the works index her desire to formulate if not a feminist perspective, certainly a visual language capable of expressing that vision, an impulse particularly evident in the sea of erotically charged abstractions and graphic depictions of genitalia. The collages appear to be of an entirely disparate mode. Here Wilke uses fine lines to construct clean, precise, and delicate surfaces evocative of architectural plans. Then in a surrealist-like grafting, she has attached fragments of vintage postcards to the carefully drawn geometric segments filled with soft pastel color. Though seemingly less intimate than the personal abstract landscapes, in their gentle whimsicality these composites enhance our sense of her visual scope and sensibility.

In many ways this exhibition underscores the propensity of art historians and contemporary critics to prepackage artists, to reduce their entire *oeuvre* to emblems, to a discussion of icons rather than iconography thereby failing to communicate the complexities the artist's development and replacing that essential deliberation with a kind of critical branding. Wilke's photographs fit neatly into what was called "body art" and personal performance of the 1970's – as seen in the work of Carolee Scheemann, Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, et alia – The drawings on the contrary remain difficult to classify with precision. In neglecting them, however, we forfeit an awareness of Wilke's deep desire for facture and her need to record or order her thoughts via graphic means in an exquisitely private moment when hand and mind meet. The strength and impact of her large scale photographs in part justify their notoriety; for her deliberately "scandalous" provocative pieces make contemporary artists such as Janine Antoni seem tame and derivative, and the trashy, banal gummy paintings of Dan Colen currently at the Gagosian Gallery seem even more trivial in comparison (if that were possible.) Direct and raw, ferocious and erotically charged, Wilke's self-portraits became the sensational work that dwarfed her other efforts. Though often difficult to look at or engage with, the late images that unflinchingly document her final illness possess an indelible quality and they would be tough competition for even the strongest work. But these drawings, out of the lime light until now, have their own power and perhaps offer insight into the self she didn't expose- or over-expose.

In conjunction with the exhibition, Nancy Princenthal's excellent monograph, *Hannah Wilke*, just published by Prestel, provides an in-depth study of Wilke's life and work. The production offers fine illustrations of little known work by the artist illuminated by Princenthal's eloquent, beautifully organized text.

"Lines which do not exist"

Just two blocks away, still in Soho, the Drawing Center presents "Lines which do not exist", a new iteration of an exhibition of graphic work by Gerhardt Richter first shown in the UK in 2009. Not unlike the Wilke show, this exhibition, a selection of 50 abstract graphite, watercolor, and ink on paper drawings made from 1966 to 2005, offers many surprises. As the major retrospective exhibition organized by Robert Storr at MOMA in 2002 impressed with its scope, this show stuns the viewer with its graphic diversity. At first perusal the drawings would seem to be the work of different hands – or perhaps the production of a *scuola* - because of its extraordinary mixture of sizes, media, and modes of execution. In fact, the father of one of my students who joined my beginning drawing class on our visit and was without any prior preparation asked: "who the *artists* in the exhibition were."

I entered into an understanding of the drawings by noticing the way some relate to the large brushstroke canvases seen at the Marian Goodman Gallery and reprised in the MOMA show. But even without the aid of color to designate and

establish position and scale, these works manage to suggest how Richter conjures space. The original selection of works made by Gavin Delahunty, curator of the Middlesbrough Institute, where the show originated, does include a few color-glutted gouache works that recall paintings by Morris Louis or even Sam Francis. But despite the predominance of color in these little works, they connect less to the Richter paintings I know than do the informative black and white drawings that provide indefinite maps, hesitant indications of the areas where Richter thinks color might reside. The tentativeness of the markings, however, signals his refusal to offer any precise sense of measured distance or the impossibility of a rationally derived vantage point. Ultimately, they seem to announce the retreat from any absolute spatial reference. These drawings resemble mental notes –with little patches of hatched tone, vagrant lines, in a scattered shorthand to be deciphered. And what do they speak about: near and far, flatness and recession, the imaginary and memory –all in a whisper so we are never quite sure what he is saying.

Because the show is arranged without any discernable order, the heterogeneity of his graphic production is heightened. Here and there one finds drawings that can – through a long and careful examination – achieve a correspondence to landscape and illusory space. We know that many of these works were executed from projected photos, though the resulting images have little in common with photo-realist concerns. These aspire to evocation rather than similitude. One of the more remarkable of these drawings, *Geburge*, at first appears to be pure abstraction: the surface consists of distinct areas, each treated or impelled by an undetectable plan. Slowly the loosely hatched upper area begins to read as sky invaded by a three pronged, animated naked form that becomes a cloud propelled by the wind – or is it simply a white shape that possesses cloud-like qualities? Once the top has achieved a semi-literal reading, the lower section begins to recompose itself into spikey rock formations to become land. Or an island? For what surrounds the jagged cliffs by deduction becomes water - perhaps. In other “landscapes,” the little areas of hatching seem to suggest an architectural form– he has rendered the frontal plane in lighter tones, and the receding ones with a casual slightly darker set of lines poised at an angle to the head-on zone. But the composition assembles itself only for a brief moment and then the foundation seems to fail and the construction slips away, the marks refusing to bind or sustain. The few incisive, deliberate lines wander off into thin wisps and the tone often fades inexplicably suggesting an instability that belies solid form.

That his mechanical “drill drawings” appear to have been made by a different sort of artist is explained by the wall texts. We learn how the random and erratic markings were accomplished by inserting a pencil into a motorized drill. In these works, chance adds an element of unpredictability. Other drawings revolve around practical concerns – like the technical rendering of installations – so they become byproducts of yet another art making process, not ends in themselves.

The exhibition requires different modes of attention and apprehension from the viewer, even if all the drawings seem to center on an impalpable distinction between perception and representation. Having enjoyed the exercise imposed by this constant readjustment in looking, I now feel the need to return to the paintings and altered photographs, and to rethink Richter’s work in light of the restless, inconclusive drawings in this show.