

## HANNAH WILKE *Early Drawings*

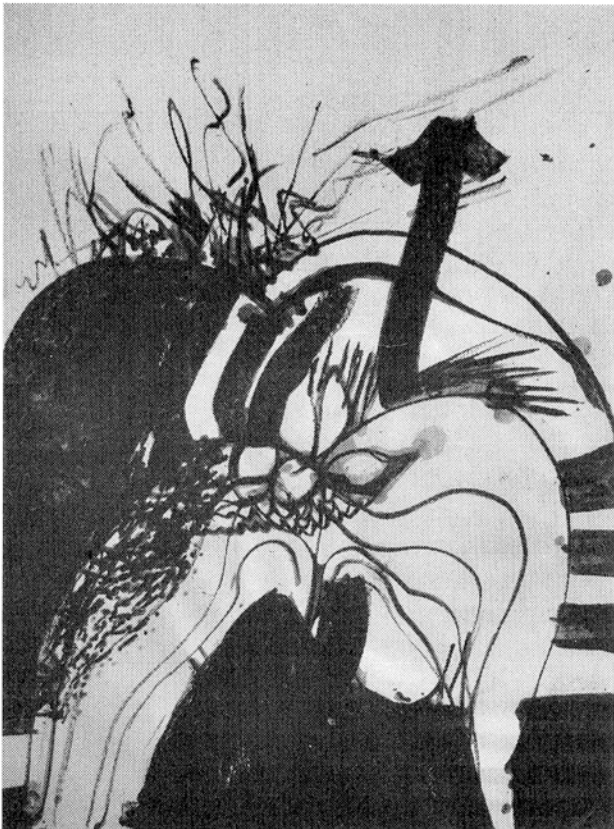
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Walking in off the street, it's immediately obvious that these drawings need no footnotes, subtext or backstory. They are the markings, of a restive, smoldering intelligence—barreling through ideas, conjoining and discarding influences, resisting and succumbing to the pull of the senses. Above all, they are the work of a sculptor engaging the hazards of two-dimensional space. She digs into the surface, packs in forms and scoops out voids, simultaneously envisioning image and object.

The drama of Hannah Wilke's life and death has often obscured that, at her core, she was a maker of things. Her notoriety as a pioneer of body art who reveled in her own sexiness, followed all too quickly by her harrowing cancer chronicles, has created an overpowering narrative that is only now, more than a decade and a half after she died at 52, beginning to admit some of the complexity beneath the surface. A major exhibition of her sculpture two years ago at the Neuberger Museum, and now this show of early drawings at Feldman, have reintroduced Wilke as an artist whose sensuality and humor are matched by her formal acumen and tactile rigor.

Mostly undated, many unsigned, and often made on thin, inexpensive-looking paper, the sheets comprising this exhibition have the feel of working drawings, not unlike those of Claes Oldenburg, with whom Wilke was involved during much of the period covered by the show, or Louise Bourgeois, who possessed a similarly sly, sensually surrealist wit. But rather than visualizing a specific project, these drawings, most of which were done in the 1960s, tackle head-on the task of making art in a transitional time. Fresh and unflinching, they set their sights and go for broke.



Throughout, you sense a tug of war between Pop and abstraction: scribbles jostle with five-point stars; funky vintage postcards hover over strips of pale, Agnes Martin-like color; geometric shapes smack up against Gorky-biomorphic swells. This continual agitation eventually leads to something else, a unique vessel that is infectiously neither and both.

In a discussion with Lil Picard published in *Andy Warhol's Interview* (January 1973), Wilke describes her vulva-shaped sculptures, which became something of a signature image, in this way: "I think I am very much concerned with form and the relationship of form. The Vagina is an internal object, and therefore it can't be castrated. It is a much more metaphysical statement, has no reality—clinically it has—but nobody has a real and direct picture of what one looks [like], and therefore it can be abstracted, and I can make it into art." This comment perfectly encapsulates the paradigm that Wilke appears to be seeking in these works: real, organic, platonic, abstract.

Wilke's restlessness is manifest in the abrupt stylistic shifts documented by the show, from geometric to expressionistic, totemic to conceptual. While not every work is a knockout, with some slipping into generic abstraction and others unable to construct a scaffold for Wilke's youthful energy, there are quite a few that seem to land just where she wants—achieving secure form and an autonomous line—with a palpable shudder of satisfaction.

In Feldman's second room, there are two sketches from 1976 depicting the artist with wings sprouting from her shoulder blades. They are studies for "Self-Portrait as Angel," a commission from the Museum of Modern Art that was published as a greeting card the following year. "Self-Portrait as Angel" is an uncharacteristically sweet, quietly preposterous image—an unexpected sidebar to an unpredictable and unprecedented career. It feels ripe for any kind of reading: the artist as holy fool; a foreshadowing of her death sixteen years later; a bit of before-the-fact institutional critique, gently mocking the immortality a museum can bestow. But in its strangeness and apparent untethering from self-censorship or autocritique, it amounts to an icon of Hannah Wilke's legacy—audacious, immodest, flagrantly incorrect.