

Life + Death = Art

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HANNAH WILKE

"Intra-Venus Tapes 1990-93"

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

Tue.-Sat. 10 a.m.-6 p.m.

31 Mercer St. at Grand St.

Through Oct. 13

212-226-3232 or feldmangallery.com



"Intra-Venus Tapes 1990-93" at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts chronicles the life, art, and death of Hannah Wilke

Hannah Wilke's life and death - in all their glory, banality, and tragedy - were her art. "Intra-Venus Tapes" features a video matrix that shows 30 hours of footage taken during her final years of life. It chronicles the gamut - the debilitating stages of her bout with cancer, the tedium of managing the illness as seen in countless phone conversations; her family, friends, artwork; the tremendous joy and sadness.

The installation evokes the heightened intensity that Wilke brought to everything, even the illness that stole her life at 52.

Wilke (1940-93) would have had a successful career as an artist without making herself part of the subject matter. Her early hanging latex works and folded gum pieces evoking vaginal imagery showed an elegant touch and an intuitive feel for unconventional materials such as dryer lint and chewing gum.

Yet when black and white photos of herself began creeping in, they added a shot of adrenaline to the pre-existing feminist subtext. As we gazed at her - bared torso and face serving as pedestal for her folded gum pieces - she gazed right back with piercing dark eyes, as if trapped in a surreal staring match.

In a sad foreshadowing, Wilke focused the lens on her mother when she became ill with cancer. Her 1984 show at Feldman Gallery featured brutally frank images of her mother post-mastectomy juxtaposed with her own glamorous self-portrait, in addition to her sculptural and 2-D explorations which incorporated riotous color.

When Wilke became ill in the late 1980s from lymphoma, her sickness became her work's storyline. Photographs taken by her partner, Donald Goddard, documented her physical battles with cancer and its treatment. Her early work's obsession with vanity continued, its focus now debilitation rather than beauty. What was once brashness was suddenly incredible bravery.

The show includes a series of monotypes featuring a recurrent image of a nearly camouflaged face made of large brushy strokes floating amid a sea of the same, but in different hues, plus several bolder watercolor "B.C.Series" portraits. Throughout her last decade of life, Wilke revisited this form of abstracted portrait in which an individual identity struggled to emerge through the various colors and squiggles.

Many of her "fortune cookie" sculptures carried along this concept as well, brightly painted with patterns that matched their bases, as if trying to hide in plain sight. Perhaps Wilke's outsized personality cloaked a secret wish to be less so.

Also on view are works that are relics of her illness - "Brushstrokes," eerily elegant arrangements of her brown hair, and "Why Not Sneeze?," empty pill bottles and syringes in a small birdcage. Her bird Chaya is

prominently featured, appearing on video as Wilke patiently attempted to nurse the bird through its own illness. Wilke painted and sketched many pictures of her birds, which flew throughout her loft at will - free spirits, colorful angels on earth.

The exhibition is a stirring reminder from Wilke that every experience, even negative, should be felt deeply as a part of the total human condition.