

Art in America

Deak, Edit. "Hannah Wilke at Feldman".
Art in America, May – June, 1974.

Hannah Wilke at Feldman

I am tired of people's one-sided involvement with Hannah Wilke's art, of their protestations that it is so erotic, so sexy. They make such statements only from sheer reflex – or out of defensiveness. Of course, Wilke's art *is* sexy and erotic, and she *does* make feminine art, but what if we look at her *art* as art, as regular art – the way we look at male art, or at that art by women which is considered neutral in content? Wilke's work is so good that one can sense the whole personality through it. She is committed to defining in art her own value as a woman. Moreover, she does this in an intensely honest way, expressing intimate, hurt, moody, lusty, ironic sentiments. She is vulnerable because she is a beautiful woman who makes obtrusively sexual images.

One of the rarest things in life is to see a physically beautiful person with a sense of humor, which Wilke also has. Hers is a complex one, and she needs it all because in spite of the excellence of her work, people talk about *her*. They ignore the forms in her art and discuss only its content. She makes erotic art, with female content, with taboo images – taboo for men because it is done by a woman, and taboo for most women because they are too shy to acknowledge the source of the imagery. Perhaps her revolutionary female *gestalt* is overplayed. It is meant to have a loud public message, but, because of the subject's private nature, it can never be made public without making the artist extremely vulnerable. Hence, probably, her intuitive refuge in a sense of humor.

Wilke's recent show was hilarious – but with nervous overtones. She showed objects with her usual sexual theme, but this time they were all one kind of image: a simple double-fold form, in many small versions, repeated in several different materials. It was as if with their simple gesture she had also folded up the sway and grandeur of her earlier fleshy, latex veils. The new works are small, insignificant, humiliated vaginal evocations. The large number of them is not a substitution for the sensuality of the latex sculptures. By making hundreds of these little fuckers, she depersonalizes the very body part whose sensual quality depends so much on its individuality. She has made it into an asexual herd of repeated images. This frantic, obsessive multiplicity and abstracting from the image are a sign that Wilke is using art as some kind of defense, to keep the content under control.

In the best of her new work, the vaginal motif is dramatically mutated through color and changes of medium. Her bright "pink flamingos" have turned into a monochrome field of rigid, neutral, clay-colored floor objects. There was also on exhibition a row of real Chinese fortune cookies that played a nice Dada Readymade game – and now we all know what fortune cookies really look like.

Wilke seemed to be playing hid-and-seek through the formal curbing she imposes on her messages. A little Minimal here, a little process-and-materials there – is all very eclectic. However, she broke through, in spite of and because of all these formal ways of hiding. Her show made me imagine Paradise under female control. Regulation and order (as expressed in her compositional elements) were present but not overused. I cherish Wilke's expressive potential. I hope she can hold on to it by being hysterical, loud, cheap, silly, funny, formalist, sarcastic, full of sorrow. I hope she can remain a woman artist and hold on to her sense of humor. I don't care so much about her numerical ordering devices or the structural repetitions in her videotape pieces. They need structuring and organization, but her methods are not unique.