

## Hannah Wilke at Feldman

Having watched her development as an artist for a decade, this observer has come to the conclusion that Hannah Wilke has two great loves—the love of the amorphous, and the love of the highly personal. It was personal, highly personal, when in a 1978 show Wilke featured answering-machine messages from, among others, several lovers. Amorphousness characterized Wilke's early sculpture, assembled from masses of petallike, flesh-tinted layers of thinly poured latex, held together with grommets and mounted, quivering, on the wall. Personal *and* amorphous were the wads of chewing gum Wilke stuck all over her nude body in photographs which are remembered, fondly or not, by art cognoscenti to this day.

These two principal tendencies in her work carried over into her latest show; but, in the intervening years since '78, they have become passions—indeed, compulsions. The amorphous? It was all over the place in the new sculptures Wilke exhibited. These were tabletop, pedestal, and on-the-floor pieces composed of one or two or maybe three polychrome pastry-shell-like forms, with more "pastry" inside and painted all over à la de Kooning. They were shown resting on semi-oblong masonite bases of a single color, often bordered by paint-speckled bands. There were row upon row of these objects, with titles like "Of Relativity Series" or *Support Foundation*.

Also on show were photos from Wilke's highly personal "In Memoriam Series"—black-and-white and Cibachrome pictures of her mother, Selma Butter, taken as she was dying of cancer. She was depicted in progressive phases of her illness—looking wasted in the hospital with no hair, looking frail in bed, and so on.

The photos evidence a real talent for loving informal portraiture. They have much of the same courageous sensitivity to the subject that Avedon showed in his portraits of his dying father. But in my view Wilke went too far in certain works. *A Portrait of the Artist with Her Mother, Selma Butter* was a diptych featuring, on the left, Hannah posing attractively



nude with various metal objects stuck to her body (a throwback to the chewing gum, no doubt), and, to the right, a nude, gaunt Mrs. Butter, one breast removed and cancer festering over her right side. The effect, to me, was cruel, though Wilke showed as much courage in taking these photos as her mother did in being photographed. Perhaps Wilke was trying to exorcise our common fears of death, especially death by cancer. Whatever her intention, the effect of the show was devastating, but with art played off against death, the fascination of death got the upper hand.

—Gerrit Henry