



Hannah Wilke, *Handle With Care*, 1987, color C-prints, left: 30 x 21½", right: 30 x 39¾".

**HANNAH WILKE**  
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GALLERY

Hannah Wilke makes feminism look easy, and why shouldn't she? After all, she's been committed to sketching out a language of female eroticism on the drawing board of representation for years now. The strongest work in this show was the "Seura Chaya" series, 1978-89, which juxtaposes photographs of Wilke's mother, ill from cancer and bald from chemotherapy, with drawings of the artist's bird, Chaya. (Wilke got the bird after her mother's death.) This work is testimony to the courage of both mother and daughter. Wilke has written that by obsessively photographing her mother, she had hoped to give her more life. She wants to transform the will to fix an image, to represent her mother, into an act of lifegiving. But Wilke's mother, with her huge eyes, smooth head, and emaciated body, looks all the more fragile and isolated by her physical deterioration. Yet there is beauty here and strength as well.

Wilke is well-known for appearing nude in her work. She projects a hippylike comfort with her own nakedness. But her self-exposure, which translates as some kind of rhetoric of sexual freedom for women, is too facile, too simple a formulation. The work of artists like Cindy Sherman and Aimee Rankin has shown female sexuality to be the site of as much pain as pleasure. The culturally acceptable forms of abuse of women have been giving way at a painfully slow rate, rendering Wilke's position both problematic and out of sync. Her self-portrait, naked in bed with her birds (*Handle with Care*, 1987), is sweet but remarkably lifeless.

Wilke's watercolor self-portraits are more contemplative than introspective. Made obsessively over a number of years, they show Wilke's varying vision of herself. Some are moody and angry, some remarkably opaque, others dense and animalistic. These images are painted with large daubs of swirling color. The most recent ones, from the "About Face" series, 1989, consist of nine masklike faces on one piece of paper. The earlier ones are huge, almost expressionistic in style. Each presents a face that is like a new distorting mirror, faithfully reproduced by an artist who, in the process of reenacting the false myth of feminine narcissistic rapture, reveals entirely other truths.

—Catherine Liu