

HANNAH WILKE

Ronald Feldman

Hannah Wilke is best known for her staunchly feminist multimedia art, but her new imagery deals with larger concerns—life and death. Alluding to her battle with cancer, it communicates her own mortality in both lyrical and defiant terms. While these qualities have always defined her art, Wilke's new subject matter is best suited to her opposing sensibilities. Her latest paintings, photographs, and drawings are as moving as they are arresting.

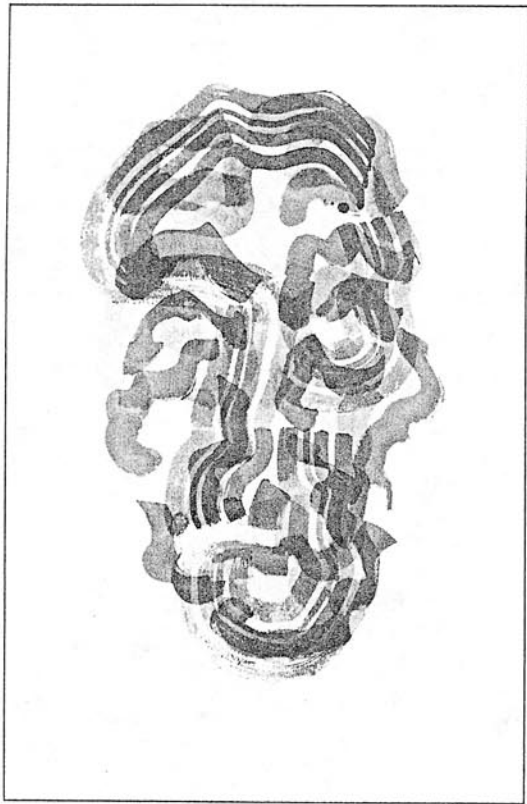
Wilke expresses the ephemerality of life in four oversize photographs taken of her emaciated, bald mother, who died of breast cancer in 1982. Beneath each image are small drawings of birds suggesting the soul, the air, and

all that is fleeting. The artist grappled with her fear of dying in less poignant terms when she created a series of nine-panel drawings (1989). She angrily sketches faces that shriek, cackle, or gape—responds to the imminence of death.

These works invest Wilke's self-portraits, which have always been confrontational, with a new kind of restraint and sadness. In *Handle with Care* (1987), the artist photographs herself lying on a bed, eyes tightly shut, arms crossed over bare breasts, hair fanning across white sheets. Three live birds perch on her hand. Although Wilke's image clearly alludes to Courbet's *Woman with a Parrot*, her photograph is less about denuding the nude in art history than it is about her own fate. Her deathly pose forges a morbid bond between mother and daughter.

In 21 watercolors, executed from 1986 through '88, Wilke pokes fun at macho Action Painting and the stodgy idea of a signature stroke. She creates a tangled image of broad, clearly delineated marks through economical twists and scribbles of a wide brush, in *April 19, 1988*. Here Wilke reveals her pleasure in the act of painting, a simple expression of her joy in living.

—E. H.-A.



Hannah Wilke, *May 17, 1988* (from "B.C." series), watercolor, 32½ by 24 inches. Ronald Feldman.