



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBIN HOLLAND

Lorna Simpson:
Easy for Who to say (1989)

Self- and Selfless Portraits

BY ELIZABETH HESS

HANNAH WILKE. Ronald Feldman, 31 Mercer Street, through October 7.
LORNA SIMPSON. Josh Baer, 270 Lafayette Street, through October 14.

Feminist artists aren't usually known for their bodies, but Hannah Wilke is an exception. She has been flaunting her naked self in performances and photographs since the early '70s, and her figure has become her signature image. Vaginas, for instance, were once putty in her hands, as she fashioned tiny facsimiles out of chewing gum, and then stuck them all over her skin. Wilke has struck innumerable narcissistic poses to wallow in cultural obsessions with the female body; her goal is not so much to annihilate these obsessions as to reclaim them, for better or worse.

"Body Art" worked its way into critical vernacular as Wilke, along with Carolee Schneeman, an originator of the genre, liberated their libidos in live performances. Postmodernists, such as Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman, who continue to mine the same vein, prefer to dress up the body or employ its appropriated versions; Wilke has always emphasized flesh—her flesh. She is one of few artists who continues to place their own bodies on the front lines of their work.

In her current exhibition, the main gallery is filled with a new series of watercolor self-portraits of the artist's face. These abstract, masklike ovals of color look like private exercises or experiments, nevertheless, they are surprisingly slight in comparison to Wilke's previous achievements. The heart of the show is in the back room, where Wilke continues to take on the difficult issues of illness, family, and body.

In a series of large photographs of her aging and ill mother, who died of cancer seven years ago, Wilke takes us instantly into the psyche, if not physical body, of a woman who is knowingly facing death. These are intimate shots, blown up larger than life, which freeze and contemplate the relationship between mother/subject and daughter/photographer. Wilke's identification with her mother is tangible;

one can sense the artist attempting to prolong her mother's life through the work. Beneath her mother's portraits, Wilke sketches a number of delicate birds, in contrast to the harsh black-and-white realism of the photos; the maternal portraits hover over the small birds, as if

ART

they are nesting.

Wilke has also recently gone through a bout with illness. In a diptych titled *Handle With Care*, she lies in bed with her eyes closed and a large bandage on her neck. A colorful bird (the artist, apparently, has a number of pet birds) sits on her head quite naturally, like a hat. In the second photo, Wilke cups one of her breasts, as if guarding it from potential tumors or hasty surgeons; her mother had a mastectomy, which was the subject of an earlier work. Even in illness, however, the artist's "Hollywood" glamour—her trademark—shines through. Wilke's body has become a temple of sorts, and, despite her bandaged wound, it looks as

sacred as ever. Yet, this show is tinged with fear. The inclusion of several older pieces, which feature a little girl, and a self-portrait of a younger Wilke creates a sense of loss. Illness may be Wilke's current metaphor, but autobiography remains her antidote.

Lorna Simpson, a Conceptual photographer whose central image is also the female body, strips her figures of their identities, not their clothes. Simpson takes on some of the same ideological blockbusters as Wilke, but using a radically different strategy. Over the years, Wilke has constructed a narrative around her self, while Simpson, a generation younger, is more interested in the racial, or racist, construction of female identity. Wilke's work is infused with her own personality, while Simpson's is the antithesis; she uses one black model (not herself), who remains faceless, in a series of highly schematic photos and captions.

Simpson turns anonymity into a weapon. The figure, a young black woman in a nondescript outfit, is theatrically posed in front of a blank background; the model

is used more as an icon than a character. Simpson's project is one of reconstruction, rather than depiction of black women. The generic figure never identifies herself, but poses the question "Who do you think I am?" or "Who am I supposed to be?" Simpson's work gets at the assumptions about black identity that have little to do with anything other than: color. Her model may appear to be anonymous, but her black skin and dreads are telling.

Artists commonly use texts as symbolic systems, but Simpson is more interested in real systems, and the necessary social activism required to undermine them. As a result, pieces comment directly on overtly political issues such as rape, along with more subtle, equally devastating aspects of daily life; her most humorous piece dives into the banality of upper-class authority by simply placing a pair of white kid gloves on her model. The world is ruled by people who know how to wear white gloves.

Six no-frills pieces are uniformly clear, angry, and compelling. Simpson's show may be formulaic, but her formula is not the least bit facile. The combination of text and image creates a three-way dialogue between viewer, artist, and model. Words lead us deeper into the identity of the enigmatic figure, who, in part, is a prisoner in every piece. Simpson's model offers her back to viewers in *Guarded Conditions*; a repeated and sliced image of the woman stands with her arms folded behind her back as if she is being arrested. Her identity has been arrested.

Throughout, Simpson's model is a passive carrier of cultural codes, who remains rigid, unable to make an antagonistic move. Her thoughts of resistance, however, occasionally pop up in Simpson's captions, indicating the presence of a vital, albeit quiet, interior life. There's a calculated coldness in this work, yet Simpson's figurative scale allows for a modicum of personal identification. The model's absence of expression, let alone a face, is continually unnerving, but she is not so much silent—as silenced. The artist always gets the last word. ■



Hannah Wilke: *Daughters* (1975-82)