

Hannah Wilke at Ronald Feldman

Hannah Wilke became one of the most visible and controversial members of the feminist avant-garde of the 1970s by using her own nude body as the vehicle of her provocative performance art. During the '80s, Wilke has retained her focus on the body, but the emphasis in her work has shifted to a new subject occasioned by painful, real-life circumstances: early in the decade, her mother died of breast cancer, and then, in 1987, Wilke herself was diagnosed as having cancer. Thus, the centerpiece of Wilke's show at Feldman was a series of four large black-and-white pictures of her hospitalized mother, an old, shrunken woman made bald by cancer therapy, but who nevertheless seems in the pictures to radiate an engagingly good-humored vitality. These photos come from a series Wilke has previously exhibited, but here she has added a kind of illuminated predella to the photos. Within the frame, below each photograph, are several small watercolor sketches of a little green bird—according to a text by Wilke, a lovebird which flew into her studio the day her mother died to be adopted by the artist as a pet and as a memorial symbol.

The lovebird appears again in a color photographic self-portrait diptych called *Handle With Care*, in each panel of which the reclining Wilke is seen from above, nude from the waist up and attended by one or two birds. Unlike the journalistic style of the pictures of her mother, this diptych is a poetically contrived mood piece. Wilke seems in a state near sleep—the birds might almost be dream images—but there is also the distressing punctuation of a square bandage on the artist's neck, a badge of the illness that took her mother and from which she now suffers.

Along with these and some other autobiographical photo-works relating to herself and other members of her family, Wilke also showed an extensive series of hand-painted, semiabstract face images. These are all nominally self-portraits, but they are characterized more by certain formulaic mannerisms than by truth to physiognomy. Four dozen line drawings on sketchbook paper are clichés of expressionistically agonized self-portraiture and 21 multicolored watercolors are masklike ovals generated by accumulations of discrete, very wide brushstrokes. The latter bear a certain resemblance to pattern painting and are not uninteresting as such.

On the whole, this was a troubling show because the feelings about illness, death, fear and hope that Wilke was trying to express didn't come across as

intensely as she clearly meant them to. The portraits of her mother, for instance, are unflinchingly harsh documentations of one person's dying, but they reveal little of the situation's psychological complexity. Wilke has written that during her mother's illness she sat with her all day every day and occupied herself by taking thousands of pictures. You can imagine that the emotional dynamics must have been wrenching. Yet the pictures look anonymous; they could have been taken by any competent photojournalist. And the inscrutable stylization of her painted self-portraits and the vague symbolism of her photographic self-portraits are also frustratingly unrevealing. Ultimately, while one respects her brave effort to deal directly with such overwhelmingly difficult material, one wishes she might find stronger, more complex metaphors to make sense out of it. —Ken Johnson



Hannah Wilke: *B.C. Series, January 3, 1989*, watercolor on paper, 76 by 55 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches; at Ronald Feldman.