

REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

Hannah Wilke at Ronald Feldman

From the day she first posed nude and wrapped in her mother's mink stole at the age of 14, Hannah Wilke presented endless variations on the theme of

the female icon—from male fantasy object to defiant feminist to unabashed narcissist. Throughout the '70s and '80s, she used her stylish and slightly dangerous beauty to suggest—through arresting photographs, sculptures, performances and writings—the subliminal power struggles inherent in "civilized" sexuality. "Intra-Venus," the punning title of her last exhibition, seemed to promise more of the same: the 52-year-old love goddess in treatment, healing herself. Nothing, not even prior knowledge that the works would actually document Wilke's losing battle against lymphoma, could prepare viewers for the devastating color images that awaited them.

At once macabre and humorous, terrifying and sublime, the 13 over-life-sized prints were personally selected by Wilke from slides taken by her second husband, Donald Goddard, during the five years (1987-93) that the artist struggled with her fatal disease. Overwhelming in physical candor as well as scale, these shots deliver a kick-in-the-stomach effect—recalling those photos of her cancer-ravaged mother with which, just a decade ago, Wilke matched pictures of herself in radiant midlife health.

Here she is peering out through the last strands of wet

hair, here showing her blistered tongue, here holding a pot of hospital flowers on her head, here striking a calendar-girl pose that only accentuates the bloat and sag induced by time and malady, here nonchalantly exposing her anus and genitals as she reclines in a tub. Even at the most humiliating moments, Wilke retains her dignity, her sense of self-affirmation through physical and emotional boldness. Bald, naked, hooked to IV tubes, squatting on a portable toilet, she sports the saving irony of a performer playing a last, uncompromising role—as dying crone. The frontality of her images, the directness of her gaze, obliterate all esthetic defenses.

On the floor in each room was a tile grid supporting aggressively enlarged ceramic versions of the vulvic forms Wilke previously made in miniature, using materials like chewing gum, latex or lint. But nearby stood evidence of the body's negation: two lead alloy neck radiation blocks, a cagelike basket of pill cases and syringes, framed bandages from a bone-marrow harvest, globs of hair shed during chemotherapy. A series of expressionistic watercolors in which she depicted her debilitated face and hands seems mild by comparison.

Watching her mother die, Wilke once complained that clinical procedures take the afflicted



Hannah Wilke: Right panel of *June 15, 1992/January 30, 1992, 1992-93*, chromagenic supergloss prints, 2 panels, 71 1/2 by 47 1/2 inches each; at Ronald Feldman.

away from us, hiding them as though death itself were a matter of personal shame. Her own last gesture, rare in this self-pitying age, demonstrates a better way to handle genuine trauma, without becoming a victim: by facing the truth without blinking, by bearing it. —Richard Vine