



Hannah Wilke, *June 10, 1992/December 10, 1991, #5*, from "Intra-Venus," 1991-93, two panels, chromagenic supergloss prints, 71½ x 47½".

NEW YORK

HANNAH WILKE

RONALD FELDMAN
FINE ARTS

"Nowadays us pretty white girls have to watch what we say," Hannah Wilke remarked when I first met her several years ago. The triumph of her final exhibition, and of her entire career, is that she never heeded this advice. "Intra-Venus," 1991-93, is a microcosm of the forms and concerns of Wilke's oeuvre, as well as a document of the last few years of her life during which she underwent treatment for lymphoma.

The images that quite literally dominate the exhibition are the 13 larger-than-life-size self-portraits, done in collaboration with her husband, Donald Goddard, which depict Wilke at various stages of her illness and treatment. Most often grouped into diptychs or triptychs, these photographs are unsparing and severely test the viewers' endurance. A particularly arresting diptych shows Wilke at an early stage of her treatment with a shirt tied around her head and a bright-red tongue sticking out of equally red lips, with an exaggerated half-laughing/half-screaming expression, alongside an image of her, head tilted back to reveal cotton plugs completely closing and distorting her nose, her open mouth holding a tongue that is a mass of blood, loose skin, and pus. Perhaps the most chilling is a single image of Wilke staring directly at the viewer, long wet strings of hair coming down over her head and face, revealing her mostly bald scalp. What separates these photographs from other artists' portrayals of disease and impending death is the seamlessness with which they fit into the body of

Wilke's artistic production.

Wilke chose to begin her 1989 retrospective at the University of Missouri with a nude photograph of herself at age four, and one of her first works of art was a self-portrait, again naked, at 14. Wilke used her body in the guise of pinup, Playboy centerfold, and classical goddess. This was part of a complex discourse that refused to deny the pleasure of both narcissism and of being the object of voyeurism, while maintaining control of production and representation. But two sets of earlier work that directly presage the "Intra-Venus" series more obviously reference the harsh social realities that underlie these presentations of herself. In the "S.O.S.—Starification Object Series," 1974-82, Wilke photographed herself with her body covered by her signature folded vaginal shapes made of chewing gum. She referred to herself as the "S.O. (Starification Object)" in recognition of the fragility and the consuming nature of the bubble-gum fascination with beauty and celebrity. The "So Help Me Hannah Series: Portrait of the Artist with Her Mother, Selma Butter," 1978-81, juxtaposes Wilke—bare chested, fully made up, and with a come-hither expression—beside her mother, whose bare chest is marked by a long mastectomy scar and lesions, looking shyly away from the camera. Wilke covers her chest with small metal objects, "scars" she called them, "To wear her wounds, to heal my own."

While the photographs in "Intra-Venus" form the last link in a consistent chain, the drawings and sculptures construct a parallel dialogue with other kinds of artistic production. A box made out of a wire birdcage and plastic medicine bottles and syringes is a witty reference to Marcel Duchamp's *Why Not Sneeze Rose Sélavy?*, 1921, while a series of exquisite

abstract drawings made from the artist's hair as it fell out from chemotherapy give new meaning to the notion of process. Two matching, lead-alloy neck blocks (used during radiation treatments) perform a function Wilke had often set for her work: using gesture to turn Minimalism into Abstract Expressionism.

To critics who often denigrated her work for being too narcissistic or exhibitionistic, Wilke had and deserves the last word, "It was risky for me to act beautiful, but the scars representing the ugliness of society sometimes went unnoticed. People often give me this bullshit of, 'What would you have done if you weren't so gorgeous?' What difference does it make? . . . Gorgeous people die as do the stereotypical 'ugly.' Everybody dies."

—Andrew Perchuk