



Hannah Wilke, *July 26, 1992/February 19, 1992*. #4 from *Intra-Venus, 1992-93*, chromagenic supergloss, 2 panels: 71½ by 47½ inches each. Ronald Feldman.



LENNIS COWLEY

## Hannah Wilke

RONALD FELDMAN

Exposing herself in her art is what Hannah Wilke did in life, and now in death. When she was 14, she had her sister photograph her wearing only high heels and her mother's mink stole. As an adult, she was very beautiful and clearly knew it. In the 1970s, her unclothed body became her medium in photographs and performances that now, in comparison with Karen Finley and Annie Sprinkle, may seem tame but at the time gave Wilke the reputation of a radical feminist. She pioneered the use of feminine imagery and the vulva became her trademark. She made vulvas out of everything—laundry lint, clay, kneaded erasers—and her best-known photographs show her in glamorous poses, with tiny vulvas made of chewing gum stuck all over her face and nude torso. Later she documented her mother's unsuccessful fight with breast cancer (most striking is a double portrait that contrasts a young, glowing Wilke with her aging, mastectomized mother) and finally her own battle with lymphoma, to which she succumbed in January 1993.

Wilke herself planned every detail of this show, including its title, "Intra-Venus." Her sculptures and drawings were represented, along with collages on Arches paper of her hair as it fell out from chemotherapy. But these were overwhelmed by the dozen over-size photographic prints of Wilke herself (taken by her husband, Donald Goddard), an unflinching chronicle of her disease and devastation by chemotherapy and a bone-marrow transplant. We see Wilke bald and bloated, sitting on a portable toilet, and a straight-on shot of her spread legs in a tub. We see her nose stuffed with cotton, her bloody

tongue. But we also see her spirit as she assumes a mock-model pose, one hand on hip, the other behind her head, or, wearing only bandages, balancing a vase of flowers on her head.

This is not easy work to take. Seen on its own, it is the simple, painful document of a woman dying from cancer. But in the context of Wilke's art as a whole, it not only becomes more meaningful but also cancels out the narcissism of her earlier work, imbuing it with more purpose than could be seen at the time. "Intra-Venus" is the last piece in the puzzle, the one that makes Wilke's life and art make perfect sense.

—Carol Diehl