

## SPOTLIGHT

HANNAH  
WILKE

FAYE HIRSCH



FEBRUARY 20, 1992/AUGUST 18, 1992. #7 FROM INTRAVENUS, 1992-93. 2 PANELS, CHROMAGENIC SUPERGLOSS PRINTS, 47 X 17" EACH.

innumerable chemotherapeutic treatments for the lymphoma that eventually, in January, 1993, killed her; for all the morbid relics — the Plexiglas box filled with empty prescription bottles (*Why Not Sneeze?*), the “brushstrokes” made of lost hair, the bandages stained from bone marrow harvests but mounted for display — for all these signs of illness and death, “Intra-Venus” proclaims a revitalizing self-interest that could fuel the artist even at her most physically debilitated. A huge triptych is shockingly personal: Wilke at left naked, bald, and seated with an IV in her breast, at right her bruised, nude body stands in a defiant pose. In between, Wilke is taking a bath, her legs up and her sex mugging for the camera. Here is not only a body aggressively displaying its wounds but also its femininity in middle age.

The photographs are “chromagenic supergloss prints” and the color is incredibly

vivid. The reddest red for a bloody mouth, the yellowest purple for bruises. Wilke is reported to have said about the series on her dying mother that being photographed “gives you a certain kind of energy.” So it would seem in this work, where color is offered up as a proof of living. All the more compelling, then, was the installation of Wilke’s trademark vaginal folds in ceramic painted ashen gray, as if to concentrate here any despair banished from the rainbow elsewhere ironically resplendent.

Hannah Wilke was instrumental in the development of body-centered art, her precedent key to an entire generation of performative artists. In her final project, Wilke reformulated the message, sounding clear to an age absorbed with the spectacle of a premature dying.

At Ronald Feldman, New York.

Taking pictures of a dying person was not new to Hannah Wilke by 1991-92, when she was working on “Intra-Venus,” a body of work posthumously exhibited at Ronald Feldman: from 1979-83 she photographed her elderly mother, Selma Butter, as she went through her final illness. Nor was taking pictures of herself new to Wilke, her eye ever trained upon her own body throughout her 25-year career. The combination, however, proclaimed the sad eventuality that this career was coming to a close — but not without a last burst of narcissistic vitality. For all the gory details in over-lifesize color photographs — the stained bandages, the bleeding gums, the bruises from

