



Hannah Wilke: from left, *December 27, 1991 #2*; *Wedges of ... (1992)*; *August 17, 1992 #3 (detail)*

ROBIN HOLLAND

# Fem Fatale

By Elizabeth Hess

**Hannah Wilke**

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts  
31 Mercer Street  
Through February 19

**Joan Snyder**

Jessica Stockholder  
Jay Gorney Modern Art  
100 Greene Street  
Through February 12

If Hannah Wilke slipped through the cracks in the last decade of her life, making art in an unappreciative world, she will not be overlooked in death. As artists die younger and younger, they are making work that speaks from the other side. This is Wilke's last and ultimate picture show. Every piece, every frame, every inch of the installation was planned by Wilke prior to her death from cancer on January 28, 1993. The show is as devastating as it is extraordinary. It should be a milestone for this exhibition season.

This presentation, ironically, breathes new life into Wilke's entire oeuvre. What more could any artist demand from his or her final body of work? It has always been difficult to place the variety of Wilke's objects into one conclusive, neat category. Wilke is known, largely, for her self-portraits, and for her abstract but suggestive ceramic sculptures; she was also an early performance artist and always a biting conceptualist. All her art, regardless of medium, was an ongoing, frequently irreverent exploration of the female form; Wilke's own body was the body in question, which the artist readily showed off to viewers.

Always an exhibitionist, Wilke was an early transgressor who felt antagonistic toward the more pu-

ritanical, more rigid elements of the feminist art movement. Her interest in her own image eventually took on narcissistic proportions as the artist photographed herself throughout her career. It is crucial to understand, prior to viewing this final group of self-portraits (made in collaboration with her husband, Donald Goddard), that Wilke's use of her naked body was consistent throughout her work. She didn't get sick and suddenly decide to display the ravages of illness. Wilke just continued to make her art up until her death, fiercely insisting on the vitality of her own body and the immortality of her art.

Walking into the exhibition, we are greeted by a room of large (71½-inch by 47½-inch) color photographs, each one dramatically presenting Hannah Wilke bigger than life. In the center of the room lies a black, funereal sculpture: a flat grid of ceramic squares with a number of the artist's trademark abstract vaginas. The portraits are horrifying and mesmerizing. Wilke's body is violated by chemotherapy and bone-marrow transplants in ways that only cancer patients know. In one work, her nose is plugged with cotton, presumably to stop the bleeding, and her open mouth reveals a layer of skin that has peeled off the back of her tongue; in another piece, Wilke sits in a stupor, naked and hairless, on a portable john. In a photo that comes closest to depicting the reality of death, Wilke lies naked in a bathtub as the last bit of water goes down the drain; her most private parts are revealed absolutely matter-of-factly.

The fight depicted in these images is to preserve life—at almost any cost. But the more time we

spend with these images (13 in all), the more the initial shock of malady recedes, and the old Wilke emerges, posing, posturing, mimicking, in total control of her misshapen, yet always heroic, body. These are courageous works of art.

A series of "drawings" made with the artist's hair, as it fell out during chemo treatments, are surprisingly seductive while at the same time somewhat chilling; the simple act of transforming her hair into art becomes a testimony to the artist's adoration of her own body, and to the essential value of every (female) body. These works bring Wilke's physical presence right into the room. While traditional drawing was never the artist's best medium, a series of small works on paper, done in the hospital, are the most intimate statements in the exhibition. Wilke painted miniature watercolors of her face, with and without hair, or wearing a turban, treating these changes in physical attributes like changes in her wardrobe; the works are light, but tinged with tragedy. There are six exquisite portraits of hands that Wilke made lying in bed with an IV stuck in her wrist; she used her other hand to paint. The color stains the paper and seems to flow through her translucent flesh like blood. All these works compose a series called "Intra-Venus," the title of the show and one of Wilke's signature puns. Perhaps her last one.

Putting Joan Snyder and Jessica Stockholder together is an inspiration. Formally, this is a show about paint and color, but it's also a statement about the relationship between the women's art movement of the '70s and the current one. The romance between Snyder's paintings and Stockholder's

sculptures is visually tangible, yet their objects are worlds apart.

Three canvases by Snyder in the upstairs gallery are sensual masterpieces that unabashedly celebrate nature; color and surface come together in a wave of irrepressible passion. The largest work reads like a fictive garden, filled with flora, fauna, and pigment that streaks across the painting; rectangles of deep red velvet and small pieces of wood attached to the canvas assert themselves like signposts, structuring the eye's passage through the work. *Red Field* is another garden with two dark shapes that hover and want to embrace. Snyder is painting at full speed, making intensely emotional, optimistic work. What is remarkable is her control of the paint, which looks absolutely wild and spontaneous. While these works are much less raw than her earliest and most respected canvases, they are also "vintage" Snyders. They take us back to the painter's most polemical, messy creations, which in their time were heretical; the artist wrote on her canvases, stitched them with material, gave them vaginal openings and left them bleeding. Snyder was a pioneer of abstract diaristic painting, a genre that inspired a subsequent generation.

Stockholder's almost whimsical sculptures benefit enormously from this context; we begin to read them more as paintings, through their color and surface. Works are tethered to the wall, but most of them sit on the floor like derelict objects. Stockholder likes garish colors and materials that are vaguely recognizable. A red umbrella is the basis for a work downstairs that has humor and wit: Mary Poppins meets David Hammons. But unlike Hammons, Stockholder pushes her materials to shed their poignancy. These works emit few emotions, despite a reference to a bed, or a dress hanging on a wall. Stockholder's objects seem to enjoy making no sense, while Snyder's paintings work to convince us of

their authenticity, their dedication to the project of beauty. What both artists share is an insistence on freedom in their art. Snyder has always bucked trends, and Stockholder is part of a postmodern movement that is compelled to break through theoretical monopolies. Not all her pieces work, but when they do, social issues become a springboard for aesthetic innovation.

Stockholder's work is youthful, intentionally unformed, and refreshingly experimental. It is precisely what Snyder's work used to be; there's an obvious shared sensibility that connects generations and historical moments. Currently, numbers of midcareer and young women artists are linked in ideological and aesthetic spirit. It's a good time for them, despite the recession. Together, they do not form one movement that can

## Art

be labeled and sold. But, more importantly, their art is equally notable for its form and content. When critics, such as my esteemed colleague Peter Schjeldahl, argue that there's nothing significant going on at the moment, I want to reach for my ... computer. *Déjà vu*. In the 1970s, most critics refused to look at or write about women's art; many of those ignored remain underappreciated, or, as with Hannah Wilke, had to wait until their deaths for some weighty ink. The same '70s movement is directly linked to the current wave of feminist—or whatever you want to call it—art. Dead artists are always easier to digest, but I suggest that my frightened colleagues open their eyes before dismissing all so-called "political" (buzzword) work. Any reports of the death of feminist art are premature. ■