

whether she twisted it into rollers or let it drape across her bare chest or fall over her nipples. The gradual loss of her hair, recorded in the photographs (at the end of the show, clumps are displayed under Plexiglas frames, in a work called *Brushstrokes*), ought to strip her of her sensuality; yet Wilke exudes an inner strength and confidence. In the past Wilke was criticized for her narcissism and self-indulgence. "Intra-Venus" should dispel such notions.

In 1981, Wilke made a piece called *Vein At-tempt—Broken Blood Vessel from Heel Kicking Hannah*. In this prescient photograph, Wilke sits in a wheelchair, its silver wheels contrasting with the ivory curves of her body, her lush tresses. Wilke's body is smooth, unharmed. There is neither blood nor any obvious pain. She toys with something underneath her leg. Ironically the wheelchair, an instrument meant to assist the victim, is the most threatening element in the picture.

In her 1974 "Starification Object Series, S.O.S.," she is bare-chested and pressed into her skin are wads of chewing gum. Her poses mimic those of the fashion models. She dons a sexy cowboy hat in one photograph, a pair of dark glasses in another, at once identifying with these "objects" of beauty and criticizing the culture's manipulation of them. The knots of gum, neat forms with a hole in the center (Wilke's characteristic form representing the female) are vulvas, the loci of woman's power and mystery, but they also read as bruises or scars. Wilke wears the marks of a consumer society, which chews her up, scars her. Wilke is both "star" and "scarred." Female beauty and its consequent power come at a painful price.

Twenty years later Wilke is literally scarred. In *Bandages from Bone Marrow Harvest*, she stands naked, perching a porcelain vase full of flowers on her head. White bandages are taped onto either hip to cover the bone marrow harvesting. The actual bandages hang under Plexiglas across the room, stained with blood and marrow. Her body, in this picture, retains some of its former shapeliness and beauty, and this only makes the later pictures, in which her body looks swollen and limp, more painful to see. The viewer gets a sense of the rapidity of the disease, its ability to tear swiftly through the body.

The series of photographs "Selma Butter (Mommy)" (1979-83), in which Wilke documents her mother's battle against and eventual death from cancer, were more emotionally evocative to me. Wilke said that photographing her mother was a way of being intimate with her and perhaps photographing herself is a way of getting close to the viewer, telling us the most private details of death

and disease, details that perhaps some of us would prefer to avoid. What could be more personal than a picture of Wilke sitting in a metal hospital can or lying with her legs open in a bathtub? And yet perhaps we, as viewers, withdraw from such intimate displays, particularly when they are threatening and ugly, rather than sensual. In any case, Wilke's project goes well beyond sentimental seduction. Like most great artists, she mines territory that others would rather leave buried, pulling up parts of the human condition with painful precision and presenting them in all their nakedness.

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HANNAH WILKE: INTRA-VENUS

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts
New York, New York
January 8 - February 19

Hannah Wilke's work has always explored issues of pleasure and pain, and her posthumous show at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts is no exception. All of the characteristic Wilke elements are here: the threatening mechanical objects, the seductive poses, the use of cynical puns (her manipulation not only of the language of the body, but of language itself), but now they have an even greater resonance. Whether or not one is familiar with Wilke's work, the exhibition is startling in its honest documentation of the last two years of Wilke's life. More astonishingly, however, is the way her earlier work seems almost prophetic in its anticipation of her death.

Since the 1960s, Wilke has been known alternately as a sculptor, working to create a specifically female iconography, a performance artist using her body, according to critic Joanna Frueh, as a "moving site of revelation," and a photographer who "exposes" her bare body to the camera. "Intra-Venus" consists of a series of large scale color photographs of Wilke passing through progressive stages of chemotherapy. We see everything from the slit on her tongue from the radiation to the bruises on either side of her body from the bone marrow harvesting. An early picture shows her running her hand through her rich mane of hair, so thick and plentiful, so clearly a part of her identity. In all of her photographs, her hair has always commanded attention, expressing her sensuality,



Hannah Wilke, *Intra-Venus*, installation view
(photo: Dennis Cowley).