
Art in Review

■ Undressing for the camera with a vengeance
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Hannah Wilke

Performerist Self-Portraits and Video/Film Performances, 1976-85'

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts
 31 Mercer Street, near Grand Street
 SoHo
 Through Oct. 26

The performance artist and sculptor Hannah Wilke, who died in 1990 at the age of 52, wielded her body like a blunt instrument. Her aim was far from precise, but luckily her target was large: the male dominance of art and the long tradition of the female as subject, muse and (mostly nude) model.

Designating herself the latest in that line, Wilke became her own model and muse, undressing for the camera with a vengeance, flaunting her good looks with a combination of honesty, pleasure and irony that was, and is, hard to decode. Was Wilke simply a victim of her own narcissism, or was she really upsetting the apple cart?

This exhibition suggests that it was a bit of both, that Wilke rebelled against her further objectification as a woman by taking matters into her own hands, objectifying herself even more blatantly, while taking on the male artists who piqued her interest or her ire. On view is the ray-gun collection that Wilke accumulated in response to the work of Claes Oldenburg, with whom she lived for several years starting in the late 1960's.

Also here is a 1976 video, "Through the Large Glass," in which Wilke executes a languid striptease behind the cracked transparent surface of Marcel Duchamp's masterpiece "Large Glass: The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even" at the Philadelphia Museum of Art; shedding a man's white satin suit, she cleverly becomes both bride and bachelor.

On a bank of video monitors that combine tapes of five performance pieces, she romps and preens for the camera, rolling about on the floor, slinking her hips and cocking an eyebrow; her voice-over spouts pertinent quotes from Marx, Nietzsche, David Bourdon and Lucy Lippard concerning capital, creativity, art and herself. Finally, a piece contrasting photographs of the naked torsos of Wilke and her mother, who was recovering from a mastectomy, presages the artist's final works, when, dying of cancer, she would continue to vamp for the camera, as if daring the illness to take her life.

There are times when Wilke's work doesn't quite come together, when it's too casual and not thought through enough. But she was indisputably among the first of her kind as a feminist performance artist, as this exhibition, so full of her anger, intelligence and physical bravura, almost unfailingly confirms.

ROBERTA SMITH



Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

Hannah Wilke in a video still from her "Through the Large Glass" at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.
