

REVIEW

Reviews & previews of current exhibitions in New York
October 1, 1996

Hannah Wilke

RONALD FELDMAN GALLERY

So Help Me, Hannah. Indeed. You can almost hear her authoritarian voice in the title of this series, reprimanding herself for her outrageous, rebellious behavior. But as these mid-career performances, videos, and photographs by the late artist reveal, Wilke would not stop pushing the envelope of "acceptable" art.

While these works have already been seen, the show brings them together in a new way. It contextualizes the artist and her work. For those of us who became acquainted with Wilke through the feminist, art historical, academic readings of her work of the last decade, this exhibition offers something fresh. Reproduced photographs and video stills don't provide the full picture. It is a treat to view the videos here (the stoniest parts of the show, in my estimation) because they clarify Wilke's strengths. The sheer force of her power in front of a live audience, and her mastery of performance, justifies her status as icon in feminist art history.

This show also illuminates just how derivative and, frankly, tired, so much of current "exhibitionist" art really is. While today's viewer thinks nothing of Wilke's nudity and exposed genitals, she was treading new ground in her time. With other body artists of the early '70s, Wilke firmly established the notion of the personal as political, which today is dangerously close to becoming a cliché.

Wilke's videotaped performances demonstrate the purposeful, knowing, pre-meditated nature of her actions and poses. She was certainly not just a beautiful woman who knew how to seduce the camera (and audience).

Nor did she simply want to exhibit her own beauty. Rather, she was a beautiful woman who intended to do so in order to expose the problematic of being an inculturated woman. What we see in these performances is Wilke's calculated portrayal of the inherent performativity of femaleness itself.

Wearing high-heeled sandals and wielding a multitude of guns, Wilke appears as a Bond girl – on the run but with make-up and hair perfectly in place. Everything is about simultaneously exposing and embodying the oppressiveness of women's (particularly women artists') roles in society. There is no need to elaborate on these issues – in current thought, this kind of cultural definition is clearly understood. Such work couldn't be created today. We have moved beyond its simplicity and naiveté. I'm not sure that's progress.

It is the vacillation between sexually powerful and vulnerable in these images that sums up Wilke's enterprise. It was really her own identity and role that she was attempting to get a handle on. Including text from powerful (at least in the art world) men and women (Kuspit, Kozloff, Oldenberg, Reinhardt, Lippard, Baker), she was grappling with where she and her art fit in.

And it is, was (is!) art. Wilke was a pioneer. This show, however, feels more like a memorial – the sadness in the air at Feldman is palpable. There's something not quite right about viewing these "before" images now that we know what the "after" looked like. The haunting images of Wilke's post-mortem *IntraVenus* exhibition linger. Remembering her ravaged body, it's impossible to see these images on their own.

– Lissa McClure

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